



Situating climate change: understanding the importance of climate, place and community

Summary report

June 2022

This report can be accessed at:

www.liverpool.ac.uk/heseltine-institute

Introduction

Following a competitive process, University of Liverpool researchers Professor Georgina Endfield, Sue Jarvis and Joanna Hayes were commissioned by the British Academy to carry out research as part of its 'Where we live next' programme.

The aims of the project were to explore:

- 1) Community understanding of the relationship between local weather, place and climate change;
- 2) How this local understanding might be used to inform planning around place-specific climate change communication and engagement.

Climate is experienced in places through local weather, and weather influences the way we experience place. Recent research has begun to focus on the relationship of place and weather and on establishing the importance of local, place-specific experiences of weather in informing people's perception of the local climate and how it might be changing, and in turn their understanding of future global climate change.¹



Where we live next

The UK has the potential to be a global leader on environmental sustainability, having set ambitious targets for net zero carbon emissions. But getting there will require a place-based approach that incorporates wide-ranging questions about community, health and wellbeing, justice and equality, education and skills, housing, public services, and employment, among others.

To address this, the British Academy's public policy team has embarked on a programme of work that focuses on factors necessary to ensure a truly sustainable future for the UK. It is exploring how a place-sensitive approach to sustainability policy could more effectively and equitably transition society towards a sustainable way of living.

In 2016, the British Academy published 'Where we live now', a set of reports on place-based policymaking.² The series looked at what we can learn from research in the humanities and social sciences in understanding what place means to people and assessed whether policymaking could better take into account how people feel about where they live.

The British Academy's new sustainability programme builds on this work, examining people-powered environmental sustainability policy solutions, to answer the question "Where do we live next?"



Approach

The project used walking as a method for gathering insight and evidence on the things that matter to local people in relation to climate change.

There has been increasing research interest in the role that walking plays in everyday lives, and in walking as a way of exploring the relationships between place, landscape and identity.³ Walking has long been recognised as an intimate way to engage with landscape and a means of offering insights into both place and self. It is also increasingly being considered as a strategy for developing innovative approaches to knowledge sharing and representation.

Walking interviews have been demonstrated as a highly productive way of accessing a local community's connections to its surrounding environment. Yet the role of walking – and talking and listening while walking – in developing climate change policy remained to be investigated.

A 'walkshop' is a workshop conducted through walking. The walkshop approach was chosen with the aims of enriching the dialogue between communities and local authorities on local climate issues, and contributing to local climate change action planning, as well as developing new understandings of walking as an inclusive participatory tool that can be utilised within future collaborations and decision-making processes.



Activities

The project team worked with two community groups in Liverpool City Region to co-design workshops in green spaces local to them. These 'Weather Walks' took place during March 2022, in Court Hey Park, Knowsley, and Childwall Woods and Fields, Liverpool.

The routes were co-designed to take in local points of interest in relation to weather and climate, for example, flooding, storm damage, particular trees and wildflowers. Informal interviews took place during the walks, with one or sometimes two people at once, using a series of pre-prepared questions, and these were recorded with the participants' consent.

Alongside the workshops, for around six weeks, bespoke project postcards were left in selected local venues asking questions about experiences of local weather. People were invited to complete a card and post it into a box provided, with postcards being collected at a later date. The postcards offered an alternative way to participate in the project, and captured responses from a wide range of people including visitors to the area.



Weather Walk 1: Court Hey Park



Time and date:

11.00am on Friday, 11 March 2022

Participants:

24 adults across all age-groups

Weather:

Cloudy and damp

Co-designers:

Incredible Edible Knowsley is part of a national network of community projects seeking to encourage people to come together to grow their own fruit and vegetables, eat more healthily, learn new skills and socialise, with the longer term aim of eradicating food poverty. The group has a base within Court Hey Park, where it grows food in raised beds and polytunnels. In partnership with The Big Help Knowsley Foodbank, it runs a twice-weekly Community Food Club, offering homegrown vegetables, other foodstuff and household goods at discounted prices. Also involved in designing and promoting the walk were the Friends of Court Hey Park and Men in Sheds, an initiative coordinated by Age UK to support older men in getting together to share and learn new skills. The walk was led by

John Maguire, whose community interest company ArtsGroupie has delivered several community arts projects in the area.

Location:

Court Hey Park is a 14-hectare public park in a suburban area of Knowsley borough, about 7km east of Liverpool city centre. It contains open space, mature trees, play areas, a bowling green and a cricket ground. The site has a rich social and cultural history, having been part of the Earl of Derby's estate before being acquired by the Gladstone family, then being a quarantine station in the Second World War and more recently, until 2017, the home of the National Wildflower Centre.

Route:

The park still contains a number of specimen trees that formed part of the Gladstone collection, as well as a diversity of native species. Part of the park is a designated Local Wildlife Site, recognised for its biodiversity. The route was designed to take in these features as well as to observe tree loss and damage as a result of recent storms, and flood prone areas where drainage pipes have been installed under pathways.

Weather Walk 2: Childwall Woods and Fields



Time and date:

11.00am on Friday, 18 March 2022

Participants:

15 adults across all age-groups

Weather:

Calm and sunny

Co-designers:

Friends of Childwall Woods and Fields is a community-led group with a formal governance structure, who play an active role in the stewardship of the site. They have secured funding for improvements to pathways and recently led on the development of a wetland habitat in the woodland area.

Location:

Childwall Woods and Fields is a 12-hectare Local Nature Reserve in a suburb of Liverpool, about 6km from the city centre. Like Court Hey Park, the site has a rich cultural and social history. The woods were originally planted in the 1700s in the grounds of the now-demolished Childwall Hall, which had a long list of owners including the Earl of

Derby. The fields have been more recently planted with native deciduous trees as part of the Mersey Forest, and while the nature reserve is owned by Liverpool City Council, it is managed in partnership with the Mersey Forest, Lancashire Wildlife Trust and the Friends.

Route:

The woods and fields are home to a wide range of flora and fauna, and offer superb views on a clear day, looking out past the city and river to the Lancashire and Cheshire plains. The Friends co-designed the route to begin along tree-lined streets, which are a feature of the area, before entering the nature reserve and walking through the woodland to observe veteran trees, tree damage caused by recent storms, a variety of wildflowers and the wetland habitat.

Themes and analysis

Transcripts of the interview recordings were analysed by the research team, together with the completed postcards. A number of key themes have emerged.

Place-based weather observations

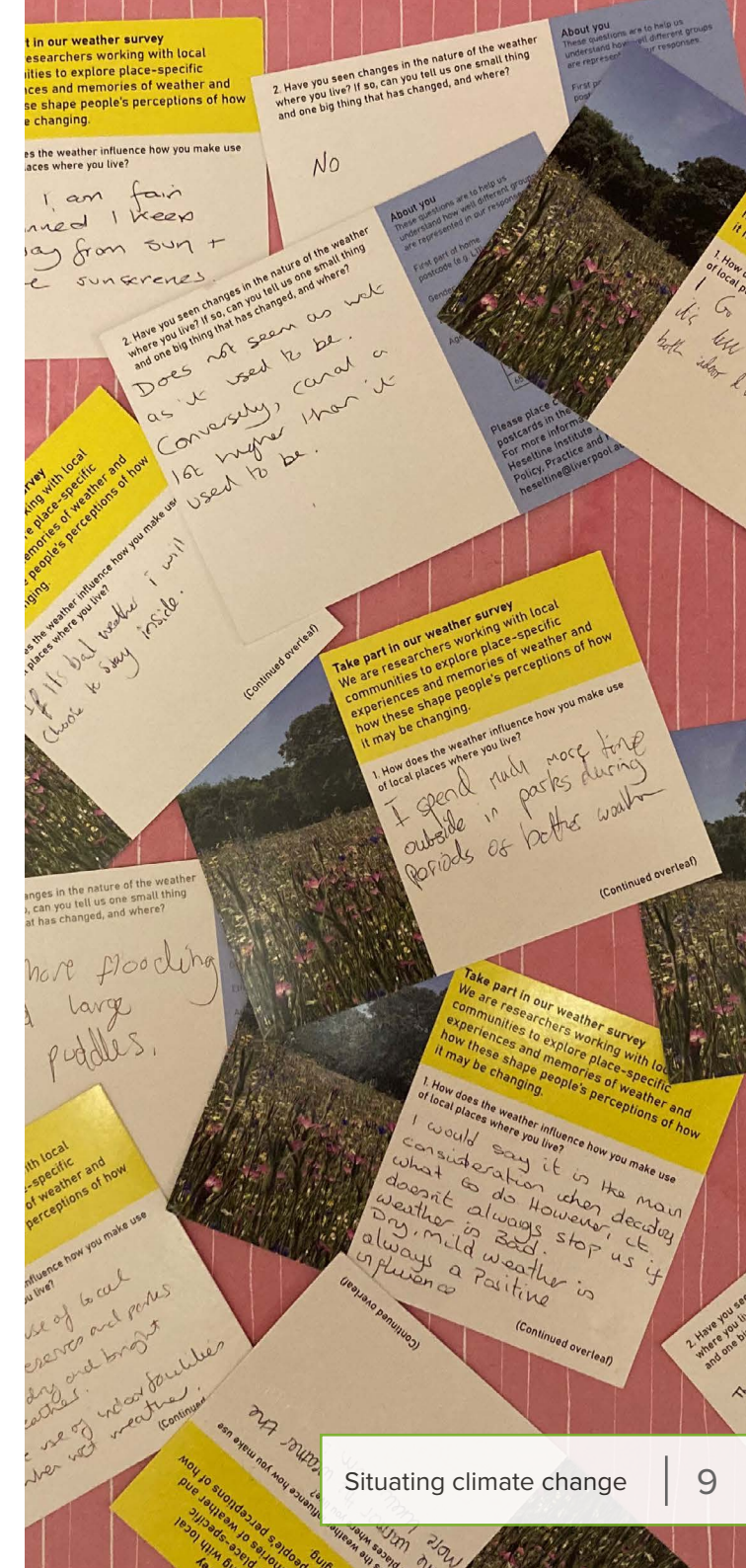
There was a perception of weather changing over time, in particular that there was a trend towards warmer, less severe and less snowy winters. Nostalgic recollections were frequently associated with memories of extreme weather, such as the winter of 1962/63, and attached to specific places, such as childhood homes or holiday locations.

However, with the exception of the most extreme weather events, which form benchmarks in people's life stories, it is recent events that appear to claim primacy in the way in which weather changes are interpreted. A series of storms within the past six months had caused considerable damage to trees in both areas, and this visible, place-based impact was frequently referenced, seen by some as a local weather signal of broader climate changes.

Many of those taking part in the walks were repeat visitors to the locations, giving them insight into how these familiar places might be changing over time. Shifting and unpredictable seasons were observed, reflected in changes to the growing cycles of plants, and the behaviours of insects and other animals. This was also a theme of the postcard responses.

While many participants had observed changes in weather over their lifetimes, not all connected these local observations to long-term trends, with some expressing a psychological distance from climate change, either spatially – it was happening elsewhere on the planet, or temporally – it would happen far in the future.

“I think people are waking up more to the fact that, you know, climate change does exist.”



Green space, community and environmental knowing

Green spaces have long been recognised as natural capital assets, being providers of ecosystem services ranging from food production to flood mitigation to wellbeing benefits. As public parks, woods and fields, our case study sites also provide opportunities for environmental and climate action, and our research sought to gain a better understanding of the degree to which local people perceived their engagement with the green spaces in these ways.

We found that interaction with green spaces, and particularly with woodlands, fostered awareness of subtle signs of and risks associated with climate change. Micro features were pointed out by a number of participants, including biotic indicators – such as the presence of particular species – that could only be identified through familiarity with the location.

This form of local ‘ground truthing’, that is to say local observations of potential indicators of climate change, could render local communities as important allies in improving our understanding of climate change and its impacts.

While interviews clearly revealed understanding of green spaces as ecological assets, with an important role to play in addressing climate change, they also pointed to a broader range of benefits associated with access to and engagement in the conservation and management of those spaces. In several cases, the Covid pandemic and other recent life events had led to a re-evaluation in which local green spaces gained new importance. Participants spoke about the emotional, mental and physical wellbeing that comes from being in green spaces, and the sense of identity and belonging that comes from being part of a community focused on the care of those spaces.

“This is like Narnia, isn’t it?”



Climate change behaviours, responsibility and communication

Our workshops also focused on responsibilities for addressing climate change and its effects, and there was a range of views among the participants. For some, responsibility lay with governments – local or national – and the primary role for individuals was to hold those governments to account. Others viewed the challenge as one of scale, requiring action by companies and organisations rather than by individuals.

Yet most participants were taking some form of local or collective action – such as recycling, participating in local nature conservation initiatives, or reducing plastic use – even if they didn't always recognise that their interventions were making much difference. There was a desire for clearer advice and information from local authorities, particularly with respect to environmental actions that have been normalised, like recycling, explaining not only what to do, but the context and importance of those actions.

Some participants felt action on climate change by local authorities and central government was too limited – that interventions were insubstantial or their effectiveness was insufficiently evidenced.

It was recognised that there are many challenges to engaging the public effectively with climate change, arising from the complexity of the information on the subject, the tendency for political and financial issues to take precedence, and the fact that people do not consider climate change as something that is affecting them locally. Participants' responses placed emphasis on the need to improve awareness, knowledge and communication around climate change for the public and also for decision makers and the importance of tapping into local environmental knowledge in more sensitive management of green spaces.

“They’ve always got their targets, haven’t they? I don’t know what all those targets are. I don’t know whether they meet their targets.”



Reflections on methodology

This project was conducted as a pilot, with the walkshop methodology being tested out in two local green spaces in Liverpool City Region. There is significant potential to scale this up, developing a more robust and rigorous approach and expanding the evidential base.

We found that walkshops were an effective tool for eliciting rich information about place-based themes, in situ. Participants were relaxed and open, and conversations were able to unfold in a natural manner. The walkshops themselves facilitated engagement with green space, with its attendant benefits including learning, wellbeing, connecting, and developing a sense of place. Other serendipitous benefits emerged from the work. Members of the project's steering group have begun to liaise with each other on a range of initiatives, and connections were also made between the participants – including combined authority engagement officers – and the local groups with whom we worked.

A relatively wide range of people took part in the context of the areas in which the case studies were located. The timing of the walks did encourage a bias towards people who were not in employment, whether retired or otherwise. Future work might target other demographic groups in order to actively interrogate cross-cultural patterns in how people understand the situated nature of climate change through local weather. The research team are also keen to elicit the views of children and young people as the inheritors of valued green spaces and a generation that will be more strongly impacted by climate change.

The postcards were created as a supplementary activity to gain a broader set of views on the key questions being raised as part of the walkshops. The return of nearly 120 postcards suggests this may be a useful methodology, one which can incorporate views from a broader constituency, and could form a longitudinal, repeat study, year on year.

As a methodology for inclusive place-based research, walkshops could have a valuable role in development of local policy and strategy on a range of issues, not least climate change and levelling up. Liverpool City Region Combined Authority has set a goal for the city region to become net zero carbon by 2040 and its strategy to achieve this recognises that neighbourhoods – including local green spaces – will play a

crucial role. Local authorities within the city region are working on their own net zero action plans. Meanwhile, the UK Government has placed community – including pride in local places and belonging – at the heart of its levelling up agenda to reduce regional inequality.

Our approach in this pilot, though small scale, offers insight into the potential of a possible community engagement strategy that connects people and places, and specifically green spaces, in order to better understand challenges such as climate change at the local level.

“Many of these ancient woodland trees have been damaged or come down. And that then changes the view, doesn't it?”

Recommendations

Recommendations for communication about climate change

- A1 Draw on understanding of what matters locally to bridge the gap between global messaging and local meaning, e.g. incorporating local weather experiences into climate change risk communication.
- A2 Acknowledge and celebrate what individuals and communities are already doing to help tackle climate change, and provide clear advice and support for those who want to do more.
- A3 Explain climate goals such as net zero, and communicate regularly and transparently about progress towards measurable short-term actions to meet the long-term ambition.

Recommendations for local policy making

- B1 Ensure the full extent of green space benefits are considered, e.g. by using tools such as natural capital assessment.
- B2 Provide opportunities to enable people to shape environmental policy by sharing their knowledge and experience of local places.
- B3 Support people to experience and interact with local green spaces, e.g. by funding community environmental projects.

Recommendations for research and engagement

- C1 Utilise workshops as an effective way to engage people in the development of place-based policy and strategy, adapting them if necessary to encourage participation by specific groups.
- C2 Identify and expand existing networks of community groups, which can act as platforms for the development of community- and place-based policy and strategy.
- C3 Develop collaboration between local and regional policy makers and researchers studying place-based agendas to help ensure civic interventions remain relevant to local communities.

Further details

More information on the project including the full Project Report is available on the website of the University of Liverpool's Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place at www.liverpool.ac.uk/heseltine-institute/projects/situating-climate-change.

References

1. See Project Report, page 5
2. www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/where-we-live-now
3. See Project Report, page 7

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Partners

The project has been led by researchers at the University of Liverpool. We have worked closely with Liverpool City Region Combined Authority and ArtsGroupie CIC to plan and deliver the project, and with Incredible Edible Knowsley and the Friends of Childwall Woods and Fields to co-design and carry out the Weather Walks and to distribute the postcards. We are grateful also to Sefton Park Palm House Trust for their assistance with the postcards.

About the Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place

The Heseltine Institute is an interdisciplinary public policy research institute which brings together academic expertise from across the University of Liverpool with policy-makers and practitioners to support the development of sustainable and inclusive cities and city regions.

The Institute has a particular focus on former industrial cities in the process of regeneration, such as the Liverpool City Region (LCR). Through high impact research and thought leadership, knowledge exchange, capacity building, and evidence based public policy, the Institute seeks to address key societal challenges and opportunities pertaining to three overarching themes: 21st Century Cities, Inclusive and Clean Growth, and Public Service Innovation.

For more information on the work carried out by the Heseltine Institute with local partners in Liverpool City Region, please visit www.liverpool.ac.uk/heseltine-institute.



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