

UK Households need Government support to adapt to a changing climate

If UK households are to adapt to a changing climate, so as to cope with the potential increased frequency or intensity of warmer, colder, wetter or drier extremes, they will need to become a “climate-ready society” that is capable of making “timely, far-sighted and well-informed decisions” (Defra 2013: 11). That vision is neatly captured in the Government’s first National Adaptation Programme. How, or to what extent, households are able to do this remains unclear. What action can households take to adapt? What are the drivers of, or barriers to, household action? And will households take action on their own?

Our research has found that UK households are struggling to build long-term adaptive capacity and remain reliant on low cost, low skill, and quickly implementable coping responses. Of concern here is that coping responses are less effective for some climate risks (e.g. flooding); cost more over the long-term; and fail to increase household capacity to adapt. Without further financial and governmental support, it’s unlikely that UK householders will change their behaviour or accept new responsibilities needed to make the permanent physical measures necessary to manage the risks from a changing climate.

1. What action can householders take to adapt?

Household responses can be grouped into two main types: **coping responses** – intuitive, inexpensive, and accessible actions such as changing one’s clothes and diet to manage heat-stress, or **adaptations** – complex, costly, and demanding actions including moving electricity fixtures up the wall and replacing carpeted areas with tiling in anticipation of flooding. Significantly hotter or colder weather is often associated with **reactive coping responses** whereas the threat of flooding involves **more proactive adaptations**.

2. What are the drivers of, and barriers to, household action?

Three main **drivers** influence householder responses:

- (1) **previous exposure** to weather extremes,
- (2) pressure of **social acceptability**, and
- (3) long-term **financial rewards**.

These drivers also influence what actions are taken. For example, in colder weather older people may prefer to sit with blankets around them. Yet turning up the heating may prove the only socially acceptable option when hosting friends or family.

Barriers to household adaptation are more risk specific. For cold weather, **slow cost recovery** can deter the installation double-glazing and cavity/loft insulation as it becomes unclear when, or by how much, lower fuel bills will be achieved.

Other barriers include:

- (i) difficulty finding qualified and **reliable professionals**, and
- (ii) **home-life disruption** whilst the work is done.

Managing heat stress introduces additional **aesthetic** and **security considerations**. Modifying window frames to fit air-conditioning units can attract **burglars** and can face social and legal obstacles in **conservation areas**.

For flood risk, **insurers** can play a key role in

incentivising homeowner action, by threatening to **increase premiums** for inaction or offering **lower rates** to those who are proactive.

Homeownership can act both as a **driver** and a **barrier** to responding to flood risk. Areas of mixed types of ownership (i.e. rental, owner-occupied, and social housing) may be unable to **afford**, or have the **authority**, to make alterations. **Personal experience** of flooding can also be a **barrier** to action. **Anxiety avoidance**, where a householder refuses to accept their home is at-risk, can reduce their perception of individual **responsibility** and **capacity** to act.

3. Will householders take action on their own?

Householders are already undertaking low cost,

low-skill, quick fixes or **coping responses**. Yet there is little evidence to suggest that more **proactive adaptations** will be adopted unless more **financial incentives** are offered such as easily attainable grants or discounts on insurance premiums. For example, those at risk of flooding **defer responsibility** to government; believe they will be saved by **insurance**; and cite **unfamiliarity** with flood-proofing products as reasons for not taking action.

Likewise the acceptance of **new responsibilities, behavioural changes**, and the **capacity** for households to take transformative measures in pursuit of a "**climate-ready society**", it seems, will require more, not less, **Government support**.

How can policymakers help households adapt to a changing climate?

Our findings suggest that more Government support is needed to help UK households adapt to a changing climate. Policymakers should consider:

- Offering practical guidance, which outlines what steps (big or small) householders can take, and making grants available that are sensitive to the social and legal context of each climate risks (e.g. flooding vs heat stress), is key to the acceptance of new responsibilities and behavioural change.
- The capacity of householders to adapt differs considerably and access to financial support must avoid widening inequalities between those that are able to adapt and those that cannot. Addressing this issue at the planning stage, through new building regulations, will help reduce the need for reactive measures.

Further info:

Project ICAD, Informing Climate Adaptation Decisions, is a European Research Council funded programme, which explores the different needs and experiences of those involved in producing and using climate information for UK adaptation decision-making. <http://www.icad.leeds.ac.uk/>

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Key contact: Professor Suraje Dessai, Principal Investigator, School of Earth & Environment, University of Leeds: s.dessai@leeds.ac.uk

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