

Submission to the inquiry by the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee on 'Heatwaves: Adapting to Climate Change'

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This paper is intended to inform decision-makers in the public, private and third sectors. The views expressed represent those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the host institutions or funders.

Inquiry: 'Heatwaves: Adapting to Climate Change'

This submission was made to the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee in June 2018 by Bob Ward, Policy and Communications Director at the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment and the ESRC Centre for Climate Change Economics and Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science.

1. This submission focuses on the importance of communicating with the public to raise awareness of the increasing incidence of heatwaves as a result of climate change so that the public can take steps to manage the risks. Current levels of communication appear inadequate and should be improved.
2. There is no up-to-date analysis of the extent to which the UK public is aware of the risks of heatwaves and how those risks are changing as a result of global warming. Even though the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has lead responsibility for managing the climate resilience of the UK, it does not regularly monitor the public's understanding of how climate change is affecting the risks of any extreme weather events, including heatwaves.
3. The most recent surveys of public awareness were carried out more than five years ago. The 'Programme of research on preparedness, adaptation and risk' (PREPARE) was commissioned by Defra and included a survey of public awareness (Ipsos MORI Research Institute, 2013). It found that only 17 per cent of the public felt that the frequency of heatwaves had increased to some extent over their lifetimes. This is despite 39 per cent reporting that they had directly experienced heatwave conditions. A survey by Taylor et al. (2014) similarly concluded that heatwaves and hot summers were perceived to have become less common during respondents' lifetimes.
4. The Adaptation Sub-Committee of the Committee on Climate Change warned that the public may not be taking measures to manage the rising risks of heatwaves because people wrongly believe that the incidence has been decreasing. The Committee's 2014 progress report to Parliament stated: "There is very little evidence that cooling measures, in particular external measures, are being fitted to existing dwellings. This could be due to a perceived low level of current risk. For example, the public appear to perceive that heatwaves and hot weather have become less common over time while they feel that incidence of flooding has increased. However, the evidence for an increase in the number of hot days is actually stronger than the evidence for an increase in flooding."
5. The 2015 progress report to Parliament from the Committee on Climate Change also highlighted the importance of communication and public awareness for managing the increasing risks of heatwaves. It stated: "There is low awareness amongst the general public about how the risks from heat are changing. The majority of people in a recent survey were unaware that the number of hot summer days in the UK has increased, and that hot weather and heatwaves are likely to increase with climate change." It added: "The next iteration of the NAP [National Adaptation Programme] should contain specific actions to increase public awareness of the risks of climate change, with lead responsibility for increasing awareness assigned to a single department."
6. In its response, the Government accepted the importance of public awareness but rejected the Committee's recommendation (Her Majesty's Government, 2015). It stated that "...we believe that this is better achieved and more effective through targeted messaging closely

...tied to individual climate threats rather than a blanket approach” and added: “We wish to ensure there are strong, targeted and consistent messages on the individual issues. We think identifying a single lead Government Department for public awareness-raising would be inconsistent with that objective and as such we do not agree with the second part of the recommendation.”

7. In its 2017 progress report to Parliament, the Adaptation Sub-Committee pointed out that the Government’s approach “...only addresses immediate issues, it does not prepare the country for the inevitable and increasingly severe changes to come.” It noted that “the National Adaptation Programme does not currently include any element of public engagement” and added: “Individual ‘present day’ hazards are communicated as they arise, led by the relevant departments and agencies (for example, Public Health England regarding high temperatures during heatwaves). This fragmented approach does not give the public the information they need to make informed long-term choices. Properties will need to be adapted to higher temperatures and heightened flood risks, requiring planning and investment by owners and occupiers, in advance of heatwaves and flooding if health and economic impacts are to be avoided.” The report warned: “People need advice about how to adapt their homes over time so that internal temperatures remain safe and tolerable in hot weather.” It recommended: “The Government should explore cost-effective ways to communicate the risks from climate change, and the actions that can be taken to reduce vulnerabilities.” It outlined three priorities, including “engaging vulnerable groups and communities exposed to specific risks such as higher temperatures, coastal change, and increases in flood risk”.
8. In its response (Her Majesty’s Government, 2017), the Government accepted the need for increasing public awareness, stating: “Across a range of specific issues such as responding to heatwaves or reducing water use targeted messaging is closely tied to those individual risks. This enables those affected to relate tangible impacts with practical actions that they can take to adapt and increase their resilience.” It added: “In developing the next NAP we will be exploring how this can be reinforced through, for example, embedding climate change impacts and adaptation more strongly as an inherent consideration within a broader range of awareness raising activities.”
9. Despite these assurances, there is little evidence that the Government is increasing activities to communicate the rising risks of heatwaves, or to monitor public awareness. No government department or agency has lead responsibility to communicate to the public about climate change impacts on extreme weather. The Government has reduced funding for communication activities on climate change, leading, for example, to the loss of the regional partnerships that were supported through the Environment Agency. The London Climate Change Partnership, of which I am Deputy Chair, still continues as it has been able to secure support from the Greater London Authority following the loss of its funding from the Environment Agency.
10. The Environment Agency does not communicate to the public about the risks of climate change. Public Health England publishes an annual heatwave plan ahead of the summer period. The latest version, published in May 2018, includes a Foreword from the Chief Medical Officer, which states: “The purpose of this heatwave plan is to reduce summer deaths and illness by raising public awareness and triggering actions in the NHS, public health, social care and other community and voluntary organisations to support people who have health, housing or economic circumstances that increase their vulnerability to heat.” However, the Plan does not quantify the scale of the risk, nor does it indicate how this risk is changing in response to climate change. The Plan mentions estimates of the number of deaths that

occurred during heatwaves in 2003, 2006 and 2009. It does not refer to any deaths that have occurred in the past nine years, even though the Office for National Statistics recorded sharp increases in excess mortality associated with high temperatures during the summers of 2016 and 2017. Otherwise, Public Health England appears to rely primarily on the operation of the heat-health watch system, together with the Met Office, to communicate with the public about heatwaves.

11. The Met Office does not consider that its remit includes communication with the public about climate change. Its website and publications provide very little information about how climate change is affecting extreme weather, including heatwaves, in the UK. Neither its webpage on heatwaves nor its webpage on the heat-health watch mentions climate change. Its webpage on the impacts of climate change does not mention any UK impacts. Its webpage on the state of the UK climate includes an infographic on UK indicators of climate change, but does not mention heatwaves (see Met Office, 2018 a–d). The Met Office’s most recent *State of the UK Climate* publication, for 2016 (Kendon et al., 2017), discusses heatwaves but does not mention how they are being affected by climate change. This was apparently because this series of publications is intended to identify trends but not their causes.
12. I wrote to Mr Rob Varley, then Chief Executive of the Met Office, on 7 November 2017 to ask what actions his organisation was taking to raise public awareness of the impacts of climate change in the UK, including on extreme weather such as heatwaves. His response on 24 November 2017 outlined a number of actions, including a plan for improving the provision of knowledge on the Met Office’s website. Since then, Mr Varley has resigned as Chief Executive. I do not know if the Met Office is still planning to improve the information on its website.

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