

Removing the doubt

Public knowledge,
trust and support for
carbon offsetting and
carbon removals in
the United Kingdom

December 2021

Executive Summary

BeZero Carbon partnered with Stack Data Strategy to survey 1,500 respondents in the week following COP26, ending on 15th November 2021. This survey sought to uncover the public's knowledge, trust and support for carbon offsetting and carbon removals in the United Kingdom.

The survey finds that:

- (1) The vast majority of people are in favour of both government and businesses investing in carbon removal.
- (2) There is a certain amount of indecision and mistrust in carbon offsetting.
- (3) Young people are the least aware of what offsetting is, despite their relatively high concern about climate change.
- (4) Low income households are the least supportive of actions to invest in carbon offsetting.

1-Carbon removal is clearly viewed as part of the UK's climate toolkit

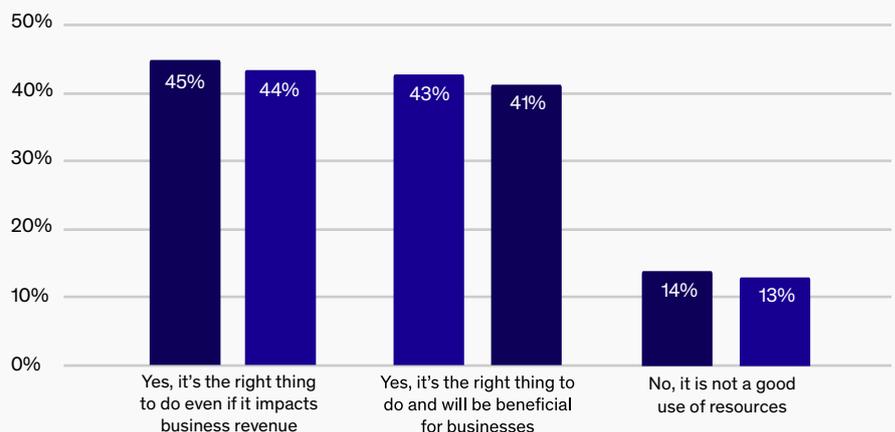
Overall, nearly nine in ten people (86%) want the Government to invest in carbon removal. 45% of people would want this even if it impacts business revenue. Considering that only 73% of people even believe in climate change in the UK, according to a recent YouGov survey, these numbers are staggeringly high.¹

The results are almost identical when it comes to the public's expectations of business. 87% of people support businesses investing in carbon removal. 44% agree even if it impacts businesses revenue. In a time when consumers are ever more conscious about the companies they use, this should ring alarm bells for businesses not including carbon removal - both nature-based and technological - in their sustainability strategies.

These figures show it is high time for the Government and businesses to step up to the plate on technological removals. So far, the UK Government has pledged just £100 million to Direct Air Capture and other greenhouse gas removal technologies. In comparison, the US Congress just unlocked £3.5 billion for Direct Air Capture hubs in the Infrastructure Bill.

Tech-based removals remain a nascent industry despite the clear benefits they have in addition to nature-based removals like conservation projects. Notably, they can bury carbon for thousands of years - unlike trees which last around a hundred years on a good day - and use 34 times less land to remove carbon than trees.² These polling figures show that there would be far-reaching support for investment in these kinds of technologies.

Do you think the following groups should invest in removing carbon from the atmosphere? ■ Government ■ Businesses



¹[COP-26 & Climate Change](#)

²[Tech-based carbon removals: What's the fuss all about?](#)



2-Carbon offsetting cannot be the only solution, but people want to see credibility in the market and want companies to engage with it

Only one in ten (13%) people think that carbon offsetting is very effective. Conversely, nearly 1 in 5 people think carbon offsetting is not very effective (11%) or not at all effective (8%). This varies somewhat between age groups, with over 55s the most hostile to offsetting (just 7% think it is very effective) and 35-54s the most supportive with a fifth of people (18%) thinking it is very effective.

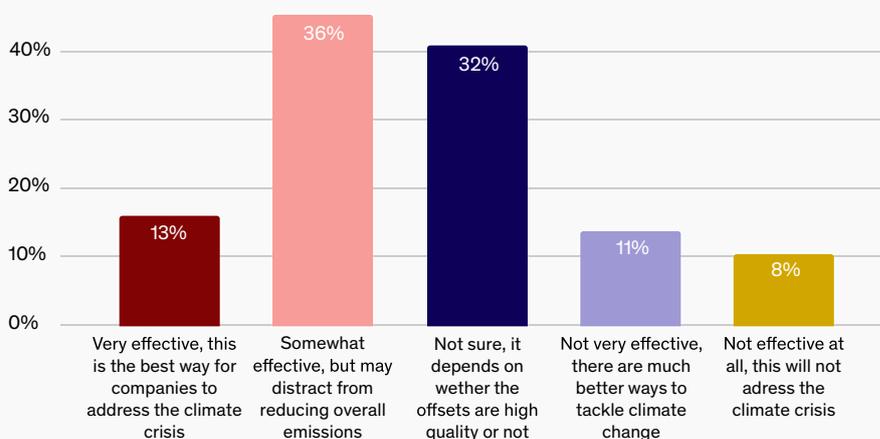
Most of the respondents - two thirds (68%) - are unsure how they feel about carbon offsetting. 32% of people only support offsetting depending on the quality and 36% worry that offsetting may be a distraction from reducing overall carbon emissions. This lack of certainty reflects the perception that the carbon offset market is weak at present and it is difficult to know what quality looks like in the market.

Nonetheless, respondents still favour companies that engage in offsetting. Nearly two thirds (63%) of all respondents had a net positive reaction when asked how they would feel about a company engaged in offsetting. The highest ratings are amongst 18-34 year olds (71%), households who earn over £80,000 a year (73%) and respondents from completely urban areas (71%).

These results show that the jury is still out when it comes to carbon offsetting. If the public can be convinced of the quality of carbon offsets - 32% of people only support offsetting depending on the quality - they are willing to get behind them. If this can be achieved, they will likely favour businesses which engage in the practice.

It should also be noted that this indecision is in part due to a lack of understanding when it comes to the potential economic, employment and environmental opportunities of carbon offsetting. There is a clear lack of established frameworks which the Government and businesses can endorse, which perpetuates this public uncertainty on the issue. Strong policy action both at a governmental and business level has the potential to fix this.

Do you think carbon offsetting is an effective way of tackling climate change?



3-Younger people are far less aware of carbon offsetting than older people

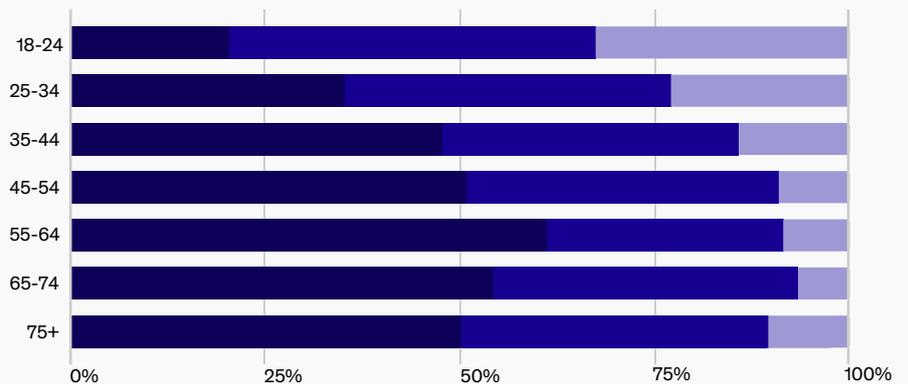
Less than a third (28%) of under 35s know what carbon offsetting is, while over half (56%) of over 55s do. This significant difference in awareness is surprising, given that young people tend to be one of the demographics most concerned about climate change, as recent polling from the Office for National Statistics shows.³

Overall there is a general lack of awareness of what “carbon offsetting” is, with just 45% of respondents knowing what the term means. The lowest recognition of any demographic was in 18-24 year olds with just one fifth (21%) of respondents knowing what the term means.

With the voluntary carbon market reaching the \$1 billion mark, expected to rise dramatically in the coming years, and the majority of UK businesses pledging for a net zero target - 60 of the FTSE 100 now have net zero targets - it is more important than ever for people to be aware of what carbon offsets are and how they can be a part of the suite of solutions to tackle climate change.

Do you know what the term “carbon offsetting means”?

- Yes, I know what carbon offsetting is
- I have heard the term before, but don't know what it is
- I have never heard the term “carbon offsetting” and do not know what it means



4-The cost of carbon offsetting and carbon removal remains a concern, particularly for low income households

Just two fifths (43%) of low income households think that carbon offsetting is either effective or somewhat effective, compared to nearly two thirds (63%) of highest income households. A similar pattern follows the demographics in social grade, with C1, C2 and D having the lowest support of carbon offsetting with 44%, 44% and 43% respectively.

One fifth (19%) of low income households - under £20,000 a year - think that investing in carbon removal is not a good use of Government resources. In comparison, just one in ten (9%) of the highest income households think this. The same pattern follows when looking at businesses investing in carbon removal, with 17% of low income households not in favour of businesses investing in carbon removal, higher than any other income bracket.

This hesitancy among poorer households follows a wider pattern in opinion polling on net zero that those worst off are worried about the mounting costs of tackling climate change at a time when energy bills and taxes are already at historic highs. For instance, recent polling from the thinktank Onward found that low income households were the least supportive of paying higher prices to tackle climate change (only 38%). In contrast, 60% of high income households were happy to pay higher prices to tackle climate change.⁴

We are at a critical point. Offsetting is a crucial part of the UK getting to net zero, but it is poorly understood, so scepticism is understandable. Government and businesses must act boldly and at a pace to build transparency and legitimacy in the market if it is to succeed as a high quality solution to tackling climate change.

This is our one shot. If poor quality information and poor quality carbon offsets continue to percolate in the ecosystem then our chance to build trust in this vital tool will be missed. Action must be taken right now, or we risk damaging the reputations of companies and government alike and further stagnating climate action in the years to come.



About BeZero Carbon

BeZero Carbon is a London-based climate solutions company that helps organisations get climate knowledge and take climate action. Its 50-strong team combines expertise across climatic and earth sciences, sell-side research, data and technology, engineering, and public policy. It supports clients through BeZero Carbon Markets, a data and analytics platform for the Voluntary Carbon Market, and through decarbonisation and natural capital solutions.

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About Stack Data Strategy

Stack Data strategy is a full-service research and strategy firm who work with start-ups, blue chip companies, NGOs, political parties, think tanks and foundations to help them understand the state of public opinion around the world. They combine traditional methods with leading-edge analytics to generate unique insight for clients.

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