

Growing Old in a Changing Climate

Meeting the challenges of an ageing population and climate change

Key Findings

- **Climate change and an ageing population are crucial policy challenges which need to be addressed to ensure a safe, secure, equitable and sustainable future.**
- **Babyboomers have a higher carbon footprint compared to other age groups.**
- **Older people want to be part of the solution and to provide advice and guidance on what could be done to address climate change.**
- **Older people are especially vulnerable to some of the negative impacts of climate change. They form a large and growing group in European society that needs an explicit policy response to minimise risk and vulnerability.**
- **There is an urgent need to exploit synergies between climate change policies and policies aimed at older people and to avoid overlaps and contradiction.**
- **There are many policy responses that can produce significant gains in quality of life for older people and at the same time contribute to reducing carbon footprints. These are summarised in recommendations 1–5.**

Introduction

The UK population is ageing. By 2031, the over 50s are expected to represent approximately 41 per cent of the UK population (27 million). This is a new and significant demographic trend. At the same time climate change is expected to result in an increase in mean annual temperature of between 2.5 and 3.0 °C by the end of the century. The British summer will be hotter and drier with average summer temperatures rising between 0.5 and 2.0 °C. Extreme weather events such as very hot summer days (e.g. similar to August 2003 and July 2006 which were 3.0 °C above average) are likely to become a common occurrence. In contrast, the number of cold winter days is likely to decrease while winter rainfall, winter storms and windy weather are expected to become more frequent.

The risk and harm resulting from climate change will **not be evenly distributed**; certain groups in society will be affected more than others. People in old age may be **physically, financially and emotionally less resilient** in coping with the effects of a changing climate than the rest of the population. The insecurity and heightened exposure to certain threats caused by a changing climate are compounded for older people by their reduced capacity for coping independently.

Carbon footprint of older people

In a national survey of attitudes to climate change, those aged 65-plus showed less awareness and concern about the issue.

Casualty

Climate Change

Contributor **Campaigner**

Climate change and older people

Older people contribute to the problem of climate change due to carbon emissions resulting from their level of consumption but they may also be more at risk from climate-related threats due to an increased likelihood of deteriorating health that comes with age. In addition, they have the opportunity to play a role in tackling climate change by reducing their own personal carbon emissions, increasing awareness, and lobbying and working for change at the local and national level.

This was the most likely age group to say that climate change is the result of natural changes, and the most likely to say that they would not be affected by climate change.

A 2008 survey of attitudes to climate change of nearly 1000 people aged 50-plus in North Yorkshire showed they are more 'hopeful', 'enthused' and 'positive' about climate change compared with two years ago. A substantial number of those surveyed (73 per cent) felt **frustration** about the level of action in tackling climate change, though this is lower than in 2006 (81 per cent). A total of 95 per cent believe the UK government is responsible for taking action; 91 per cent believe industry and business should act; and 84 per cent believe it is the responsibility of their local authority.

Three general categories of old age can be identified: **baby boomers, seniors and elders**. Within these three broad categories there is great variation with regard to levels of wealth and consumption. However, by examining household expenditure on goods and services at different stages of life, it is possible to determine an approximate average carbon footprint by age.

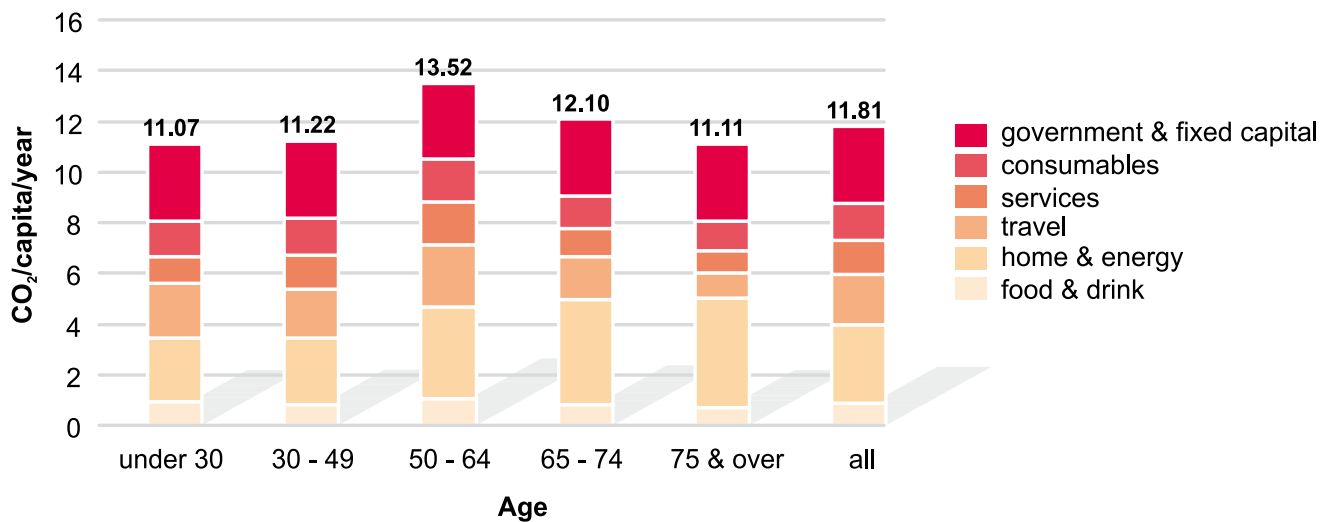
Baby boomers are the post-war generation born in the period 1946 to 1964. The term baby boomer is used here to refer to individuals aged 50–64 years. Baby boomers are seen as having a particular impact on society not just because of their sheer numbers but also with respect to the different values and attitudes they hold. They are bringing higher levels of consumption to middle and later life. They are re-inventing old age basing it on new consumption and leisure orientated lifestyles, where travel and cosmopolitanism are key features. They are highly car dependent, with car use representing 71 per cent of all trips made by the 50–59 year olds. On average baby boomer individuals have a carbon footprint of approximately 13.5 tonnes, and emit 1.5 to 2.5 tonnes more CO₂ per year than any other age group.

The August 2003 European heatwave clearly demonstrated the consequences of a rapid rise in temperatures, which reached 40°C and resulted in the death of an estimated 14,802 mainly elderly people in France and 2,139 (16 per cent) excess deaths in England and Wales. The main causes of illness and death during a heatwave are respiratory and cardiovascular.

The severe floods of June 2007 were linked to the deaths of 13 people, caused damage to approximately 48,000 homes and 7,000 businesses and forced thousands of people to leave their homes across England and Wales. Although the summer 2007 floods cannot be attributed directly to climate change, they do provide a clear indication of the scale and nature of the severe weather events we may experience in the future. The flooding triggered a series of emergencies which stretched local resources to the limit. Older people, especially those without the resources to cope, will be affected more by such events than the rest of the population (the Pitt Review, 2008).

Seniors (aged 65–74) have lived through the Second World War and grew up in years of austerity. Many seniors have a low income and tend to be prompt bill payers, debt averse and dislike waste. This group has experienced major lifestyle and life stage changes such as retirement and bereavement. Car





UK Age-related carbon footprint

trips represent 68 per cent of all trips for those aged 60-69 years of age. Like the baby boomers, they enjoy travelling. Seniors have the second highest footprint compared to other age groups. A senior has a carbon footprint of approximately 12.1 tonnes of CO₂ per year.

Elders (aged 75 plus) share many of the characteristics of the seniors. They have lived through great hardships during the twentieth century. They are aware of their own mortality and the concept of death. They are coping with increasing care needs and declining health. Their CO₂ emissions from energy use in the home are 40 per cent higher than the national average. This is partly due to smaller household occupancy and the fact that older people tend to remain at home with a high demand for warmth. As people get older they reduce their CO₂ emissions from transport. This reflects a reduction in their physical mobility and increasing dependence on public transport. Those aged 70-plus undertake 10 per cent of trips by bus and 60 per cent by car, compared to 4 per cent and 71 per cent, respectively, for those aged 50-59. Elders are less car dependent. They have the highest climate impact per pound spent compared to all other age groups. This is because home heating, which is carbon intensive, represents 40 per cent of their carbon footprint.

Vulnerability of older people to climate change

As people grow older they are increasingly faced with declining health and physical strength, disability, loss of income and bereavement. The effects of climate change such as high temperatures, storm damage, and poor access to public services due to extreme weather events may pose a threat to the quality of life of older people. Such **threats** can disrupt an individual's way of life and routine and force them to mobilise coping resources to avoid a decline in their well-being.

An older person's **sensitivity** to the effects of climate change will be determined by genetic disposition, pre-existing burden of disease or ill health, income, geographic location, family support systems, quality of public health infrastructure and access to relevant local information.

Coping capacity will be **shaped by inequalities**, social injustice, disempowerment and access to key essential services.

Therefore, healthy lifestyles, coping skills, strong family and social ties, active interests and, of course, savings and assets, will all assist in ensuring that people's reserves are and remain strong in later life.

A national workshop entitled Growing Old in a Changing Climate: Meeting the Challenge of Climate Change was held on 26 March 2008. Three wide-ranging themes emerged from the workshop. Older people:

- are **willing to make changes** and contribute to tackling climate change
- think **government should do more** (e.g. deal with packaging through legislation improve the quality of housing stock, public transport and energy efficiency)
- should be more **involved with policy making** and problem solving because they have huge amounts of experience to draw upon.

A new and vigorous national policy framework, which combines sectoral and cross-sectoral approaches and temporal sequencing, is needed to link climate change interventions and policies in order to improve the quality of life of older people. Currently there is no coherent policy response addressing the interface between climate change and older people. There is a need for policies to be sharpened, focused and coordinated to deal with the range of impacts a changing climate will have on the lives of an ageing population.

Policy initiatives to reduce climate vulnerability of older people can focus on each part of the dynamic process that creates vulnerability, namely: ensuring people reach later life with capacity to cope, reducing the challenges they face in later life, and providing adequate health and social care.

This policy brief is based on the paper "Growing Old in a Changing Climate", by Gary Haq, John Whitelegg, and Mervyn Kohler published by the Stockholm Environment Institute (2008).

Recommendations

Risk assess all future policies

The scope and magnitude of the threats associated with global climate change for all sectors of the population and national infrastructure demand that central government departments risk assess all future policies to ensure that, directly or indirectly, implementation does not undermine government targets to reduce UK greenhouse gas emissions.

Climate change proof the homes of older people

There should be continued investment to ensure the highest standards of energy efficiency to reduce fuel bills and CO₂ emissions. In order to reduce CO₂ emissions from the housing sector and tackle fuel poverty, it is essential that the homes of older people are climate change proofed as quickly as possible and that this is done for existing homes as well as new build. A major programme of investment funded by national government is necessary so that every dwelling in England is retrofitted to the highest possible standard of energy efficiency. The programme should start with all those of retirement age. There should be investment in the third sector (i.e. voluntary and community organisations, charities, and social enterprises) to work at the grass roots of communities to identify properties and older people who could benefit from such a scheme.

Enrich local accessibility

Every local authority should use the opportunity of Local Area Agreements and Multi Area Agreements to re-focus its activities and budgets specifically towards delivering safer, stronger and healthier communities for older people. A major programme of local accessibility enrichment and modal shift taking into account best practice on walking, cycling, public transport and land use planning in Germany, Switzerland, Denmark and the Netherlands. Strategic Health Authorities and local authorities have a key role to play in developing integrated and preventative measures to ensure older people enjoy healthy and active ageing.

Better transport for older people

Older people have suffered from the trend toward out-of-town shopping centres that are accessible only by car, and from the withdrawal of so many bus services across the country. By 2015, standards of modal share and public transport efficiency, reliability, interchange potential, safety and security should be equal to best practice in the European Union. Public transport vehicles should be designed with the needs of older people and the mobility disadvantaged in mind and local services (e.g. shops, post offices and medical facilities) should be plentiful and located at a density that reduces average distances between user and facility.

Leadership on older people and climate change

Leadership is required to address the challenge of growing old in a changing climate and to ensure a safe, secure, equitable and sustainable future for older people. Central government should establish an Older People and Climate Change Group that brings together older people's organisations, key stakeholders, the voluntary sector, government agencies and academia to develop a national policy framework that sets out cross sectoral interventions and policies to improve the quality of life of older people.

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