

# Public Health and Climate Change

Monday, 21st – Tuesday, 22nd February 2022

Briefing note on the Collective Action on Climate and Health Project

## 1 Background

Climate change has been recognised by the World Health Organisation and by the major UK professional health bodies as “the defining health challenge of our time”, which poses a dangerous and immediate threat to the health of populations in the UK and worldwide. The combined climate and nature loss crisis is a driver of zoonotic diseases and disease transmission. In combination with pollution, this has created a Planetary Emergency now exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Public health professionals are increasingly acting on their responsibility to recognise, warn about, and help society to deal with threats from global heating. The scale and complexity of the health sector, and the number of actors and institutions, pose a challenge in creating a shared agenda.

This initiative followed a round-table discussion convened in October 2019 by the then Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge, Dr Rowan Williams, and the Editor-in-Chief of the BMJ, Dr Fiona Godlee, along with members of the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change and the Climate and Health Council.

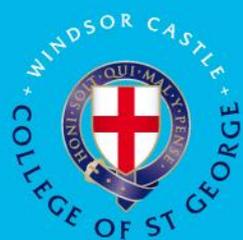
Public engagement and communication were recognised as key requirements where further work was needed. While health professionals are a trusted voice, they are not necessarily the best communicators on wider issues. With the Covid-19 global pandemic, the need to make a clear link in the minds of Governments and their publics around the world between human health and planetary breakdown has become more imperative. The pandemic has given even greater voice to health professionals in public policy at national and global levels, creating even further impetus to the collaboration that this project seeks to help promote.

A small working group was formed of individuals who have worked extensively at senior leadership levels, in the UK and internationally, on collaborative strategies in the health, climate, biodiversity and food sectors (Dr Mike Clarke, David Fell and Dr Robin Stott). This group has been supported by a Steering Group<sup>1</sup>.

The team has been working in partnership with St George's House, which exists to enable people of influence to discuss issues of national and international importance. It has a track record of enabling challenging issues to be discussed

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<sup>1</sup> The Steering Group has comprised Fiona Godlee (Editor-in-Chief, BMJ), Anthony Costello (Professor of Global Health and Sustainable Development, University College London), Richard Smith (Chair, UKHACC), and Ann Jones/Nicky Amos (National Federation of Women's Institutes, Chairs of Public Affairs Committee), Alice McGushin (Lancet Countdown).



openly and honestly in a safe intellectual space, and in producing reports that influence public institutions and Government policy at a high level.

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation UK Branch has supporting the project as part of its strategic programme on creating the conditions for change in response to global heating, and is kindly providing the financial support to enable the Consultation process.

## **2 Project goal and scope**

This project is driven by the overall goal of enabling the healing professions to have maximum impact in ensuring that more people become active in tackling climate change, and thereby helping to heal the planet. It seeks to contribute to high-level systems change, through collaboration for collective impact.

The aim is to grow cross-sectoral collaboration and to influence the work of others at a strategic level, by:

- building a coalition of progressive leaders
- catalysing the development of effective frames for messaging and public engagement, and exploring ways of engaging people locally and catalysing peer-peer diffusion of ideas
- articulating ambition for a post-COP26 legacy as part of the UK's global leadership role in tackling climate change.

An online Consultation event was held by St George's House in September 2020 which affirmed the need and desire for a cross-sectoral collaborative programme, which helps the healing professions to have maximum impact in ensuring that more people become active in tackling climate change (and the wider planetary crisis). More specifically, these discussions identified the need to establish a 'design-test-trial-scale' project on engaging the public on climate and health action, through community and deliberative methods of communication.

The meeting identified the need for creating positive stories about the future which would best engage the public, and the importance of developing narratives of 'well-being' that link health and climate change. The nature of the 'health lens', the need for individual (and collective) agency, the power of social movements and, especially, peer-to-peer influencing are all strategic communication requirements.

The online Consultation was followed by a debate with Dr David Nabarro (World Health Organisation Special Envoy on Covid-19 and UN Special Adviser on the 2030 Agenda and UN Food Systems Summit) and Fiona Godlee as part of the St George's House In-Conversation programme. This had an invited high-level UK and international audience, and it highlighted the global need for more strategic cross-sector collaboration to respond effectively to this agenda.

Many of the participants in this initiative operate internationally, in a range of leadership roles. However, the scope of this project is focussed on UK collaboration necessary to underpin the UK's global leadership role, and aims

to complement existing health sector initiatives. This includes the Climate and Health Coalition of civil society organisations and global networks active in climate and health, which was convened Wellcome Trust's *Our Planet Our Health* programme.

### 3 Progress and challenges

Building a collaborative leadership group with a shared strategy is relationship-led process, which is heavily dependent on personal contact. Covid-19 has been a major challenge to this initiative since it was conceived. It has slowed momentum in terms of the developing a strong sense of common purpose and peer group identity, and also the degree of commitment from participants and the resources this can unlock.

Meanwhile, there has been growing recognition of the health links with the climate-nature crisis, the risks of exceeding planetary boundaries, and growing public salience of this agenda, such as:

- The Climate Coalition publication *This Report Comes With Health Warning*, setting out the impacts of climate change on public health. The report recommends that health professionals need to use their trusted voice to tell some hard truths about what's making their patients ill, as the evidence increasingly connects the harms done to the planet with damage to human health.
- A joint publication *Health in the Global Environmental Agenda* by the Global Health Academy, University of Edinburgh and the International Institute for Sustainable Development highlights the lack of institutional capacity to address the environmental determinants of health outcomes and health inequities, and calls for greater connection between these agendas to develop cohesive, comprehensive policies that protect both people and the planet.
- More in Common carried out *Britain's Choice*, one of the largest-ever national studies of our country's social psychology over an 18 month period. The research shows public concern for the natural environment and climate change to be an issue with potential to be a unifying issue in British society.

A strategic review of the Initiative was carried out in 2021 with the Steering Group, following consultation with The Climate Coalition, Wellcome's *Our Planet Our Health* team, the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit, and other subject matter experts in the climate and health sectors. Key conclusions were:

1. The strategic need this initiative is seeking to address remains valid and current, despite delays due to Covid-19.
2. Institutional commitment and collaborative leadership are key determinants of future progress.
3. Growing collaborative leadership among system-changers is strategic objective
4. We should be explicit about the longer-term programme that this initiative is seeking to catalyse.

5. There is a substantial body of good practice - and the associated leadership behaviours - for successful collaboration aimed at social change. A guiding coalition would provide leadership and direction, and would encourage others to also engage and commit. What is needed are a small number of organisations willing to state their intent – in principle – to help develop and deliver a tangible and relevant programme of action.

The February 2022 Consultation, as a minimum, will focus on developing a call to action and statement of need/case for action for wider circulation. It also hoped that the meeting would be to bring into being a guiding coalition to initiate action to secure the necessary resources that would enable a one or more organisations to commit to developing and then delivering a 'design-test-trial-scale' project.