

The background of the title section is a yellow field with a grey pipe on the left side emitting a grey plume that flows across the top. Below the pipe, there are stylized, layered hills in shades of brown, tan, and green, and a blue area at the bottom representing water.

**how is the
environment and
climate change
affecting your health?**

A youth-led Inquiry into climate change and health

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Throughout 2022, the Association for Young People's Health (AYPH) supported our [Youth Advisory Panel](#) (YAP) to conduct a youth-led inquiry into how [climate change](#) is affecting young people's health. The panel wanted to understand how the environment and climate change are impacting on young people's health now, in the UK context, and to think about what could be done to help. The panel also wanted to gather evidence from young people to inform AYPH's position on climate change and to share with policymakers and those working to improve young people's health.

Methods

The Inquiry started with an open call to find out young people's lived experiences of how climate change is affecting them. We conducted an on-line survey, and circulated question cards at conferences and workshops for young people to complete. AYPH also developed a [free discussion guide](#) to help adults lead conversations with young people in schools and youth groups. A total of 171 responses came from across the country including:

- 106 young people took part in 6 groups run by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) or the Kaizen Partnership Ltd
- 30 young people completed the online survey & postcards given to them by AYPH
- 20 young people wrote answers or filled in postcards at one secondary school
- 15 young people took part in a Woodcraft Folk discussion

The Inquiry culminated in a one day event in December 2022. The aim of the day was to develop ideas and recommendations to address how climate change is impacting young people's health. The three groups of young people who attended were the AYPH YAP, the [Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health's youth engagement group](#) (RCPCH &Us), and two Youth Advisory Boards from [Mancroft Advice Project](#) (MAP) in Norfolk. The youth groups were selected to reflect the YAP's desire to hear from young people living in urban areas, young people living in rural areas and young people living with long term conditions. YAP members shared the responses to their open call with the attendees.

We then heard evidence from professionals representing different sectors. These included representatives from the [PSHE Association](#) representing perspectives from education, the RCPCH highlighting key policy issues, an AYPH Trustee working as a GP provided a health context and AYPH staff reflected on issues for the voluntary sector. The bulk of the day saw everyone working together to develop recommendations and next steps.

"I really enjoyed the fact that it was actually youth led. Youth led can sometimes mean that young people are just consulted but it was really nice to feel like we had an element of control over the project. I found it particularly interesting at our inquiry event when we had the mix of young people and adults all giving their points of view on various topics. I loved the fact that it felt like we were all equals no matter our background or age and it was really nice to hear so many different perspectives." – YAP member

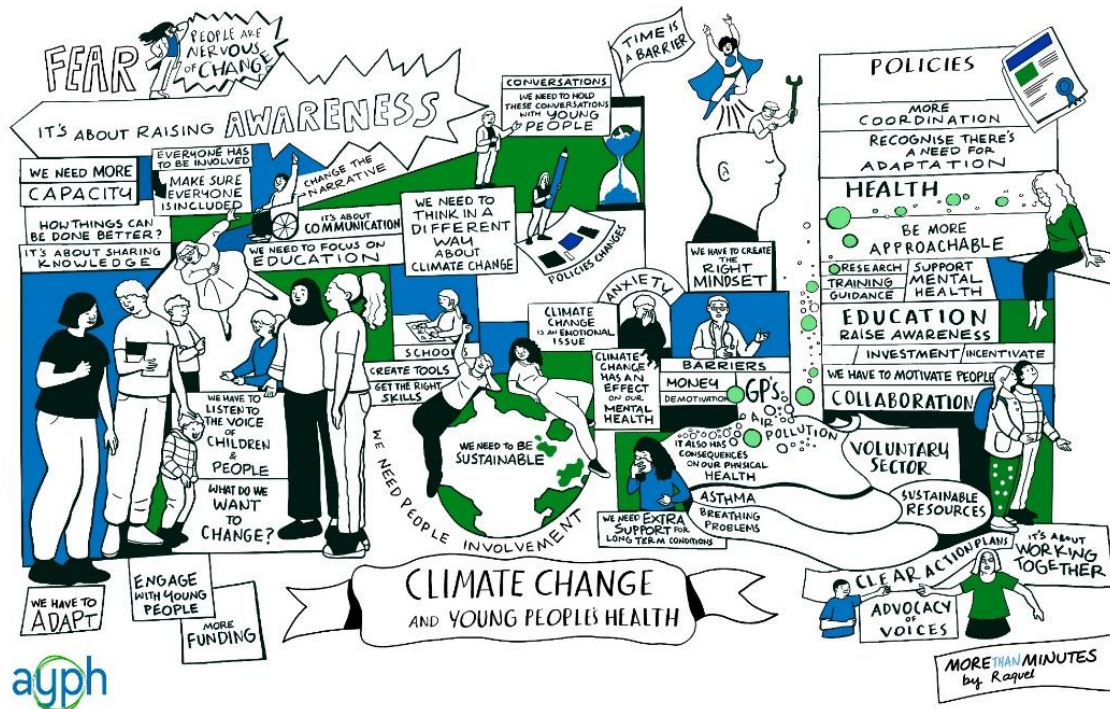


Figure 1 Visual minutes for our Inquiry event in December 2022

What young people told us

A long standing member of our YAP took on the task of analysing young people’s responses to our survey and comment cards to help us prepare for the Inquiry event. Several recurring themes were highlighted.

The health issues young people are worried about

- Asthma – Lots of young people mentioned this. People also just mentioned ‘breathing’ and ‘breathing problems’. Young people were finding they were needing to use their inhalers more if it was hot & dusty. They mentioned the role of increased pollution and lack of oxygen, humidity, increase in carbon dioxide, and risks from the effect of heat on asbestos and plastics.
- Allergies – hay fever and dust allergies
- Epilepsy – triggered by extreme heat
- Sleep – much harder when the weather is extreme
- Cancer and lung disease, also triggered by air pollution
- Skin issues caused or made worse by the weather, including eczema
- Managing pain in long-term conditions made worse by weather like arthritis
- Access to good nutrition if there was pressure on food systems
- Possibility of new viruses and new diseases

“Overwhelmingly, asthma was the biggest condition mentioned as being exacerbated by climate change.” – YAP member

The importance of anxiety and worry

- Worrying about their **own health** – that their own chronic conditions might get worse.
- Worrying what **the future** might hold – that things may get worse, with increased risk of disease and crisis

- Worrying about **other people** – several mentioned that they were concerned about other chronically ill people who were closer to the front line of climate change.

Some of this worry centred on the pressure young people were feeling from adults to address climate change now and in the future. They were worried they did not know how to make these changes and did not feel they had the agency or ability to be part of the solution. Health is related to young people's ability to cope with everyday life. Young people said that the impacts of these things affected their concentration, which makes things like preparing for exams harder.

Messages from young people and professionals

Some of the key messages highlighted through the Inquiry process included:

- **Here and now:** The importance of recognising that this is an issue for young people in the UK, now. This is not just something happening in other parts of the world. Young people's lives – specifically their health – is already being affected.
- **The impacts on young people are many and varied:** They fall into both physical health (breathing problems, exacerbation of long term conditions, impacts on sleep, skin issues, pain and nutrition) and mental health (particularly anxiety).
- **Thinking more holistically:** There is a need to thread climate through everything in young people's lives, rather than treating it as a side issue. This includes, for example, its relationship to key public health issues such as vaping, the drugs trade, and food choice, and other issues such as the education curriculum, economic inequality and young people's ability to take control of their lives and outcomes.
- **Acknowledging the issue:** Simply focusing on how to stop climate change is adding to young people's anxiety as it is clearly happening and will have to be lived with. Becoming more proactive about coping and finding ways to alleviate impacts is just as important to their wellbeing as making future plans for stopping it happening.
- **Young people need to be considered and protected:** Although alarm is important as a driver for change, we must find ways to discuss this without pointlessly increasing anxiety – adults need to be 'in the room' and need to demonstrate they are doing something. Adults also need to model calm, teachers need to grapple with their own feelings, and practical solutions to immediate impacts need to be offered.
- **Young people need to have a role:** There is a challenge around enabling young people's sense of personal agency in the face of climate crisis. They feel guilty, and personally responsible, and it is important that the issue is not just framed as an 'individual behaviour' issue. Their generation did not get us into this situation, but young people have a huge number of creative suggestions about how to help their own age group to adapt and cope. Their voice is critical.

Sharing the messages

A huge number of ideas and experiences were gathered through the Inquiry. Following the event, we asked participants to rank the recommendations by importance to create a shortlist. The ranking came back relatively even with no real outliers, which demonstrates how interconnected these issues are. The only significant variation was from young people

wanting to be included in conversations and decision making about climate change being ranked highest and lowering the voting age being ranked lowest.

In a follow up conversation with the YAP there was a clear desire to produce a resource specifically for other young people as an audience as well as something to give out to schools, local organisations and health settings. They stressed the importance of creating something that made both young people and professionals feel a sense of agency rather than more overwhelmed and hopeless. AYPH has supported the YAP to turn the findings of the Inquiry into an interactive board game that will be used as an educational tool for professionals who attend AYPH's training courses. There is a freely available [poster version](#) of the board game that features the shortlisted recommendations.

“For the wider movement I think the narrative must become more intersectional and hope-focused to keep us going long term”

– YAP member

AYPH is also conducting an internal audit about our environmental impact and developing a responsive policy on climate change.

Conclusion

Climate change is negatively impacting young people's health in the UK right now. It is vital that professionals working with young people acknowledge this and find ways to support them to cope and adapt. This needs to be done cooperatively with young people in a way that doesn't exacerbate the worry and anxiety they are already facing. Throughout this work, it was made clear to us that many professionals are not talking to young people about how climate change is impacting them. The YAP and young people who attended our Inquiry event all stressed the importance of normalising these conversations and helping professionals in a range of roles see that this should be part of their work with young people.

Next steps

Come to one of our training sessions where you will get to play our board game and find strategies to support young people around climate change. Our [poster](#) is available to everyone. The YAP is particularly keen to get it into schools, youth and health settings with the express aim of opening up space for more conversations about how climate change is affecting young people's health.

About AYPH

AYPH works to understand and meet the particular health and wellbeing needs of 10-25 year olds. To find out more about our work visit our website ayph.org.uk or email info@ayph.org

@YPHealth @AYPHcharity