

Experience as (adaptation) expertise: a case for epistemic justice

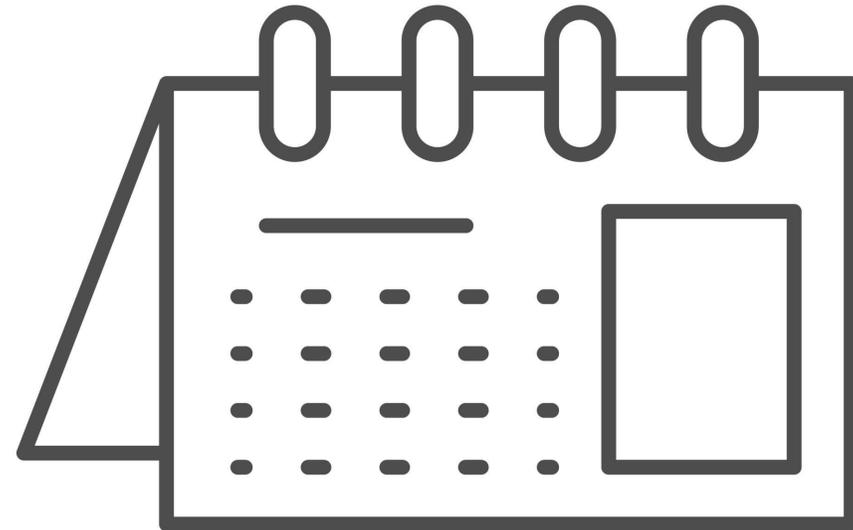
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Adaptation COP, June 2025

Session overview

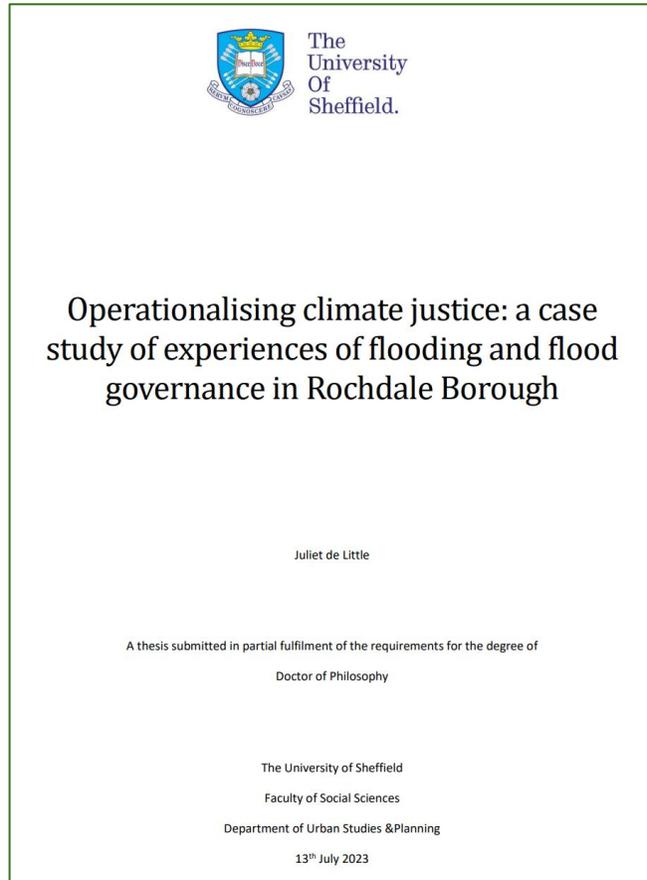
- 10.15 - 10.45 Presentation of paper
- 10.45 - 11.00 Questions
- 11.00 - 11.25 Structured discussion
- 11.25 - 11.30 Wrap up



Paper presentation

**Lived experience as (adaptation)
expertise: integrating epistemic
justice for a quadrivalent theory of
climate justice**

About the paper



- Resulting from on PhD research aiming to operationalise climate justice for climate adaptation in England
- Investigates a case study of experiences of flooding in Rochdale Borough
- Language varies between adaptation and flooding as a specific example

The importance of climate justice for adaptation

Climate change adaptation

CCC found that UK's preparations for climate change are inadequate¹



Who is impacted?

Certain people and groups are made more vulnerable by the impacts of climate change^{2,3}



Need for climate just considerations

This presentation is concerned with exploring the value of incorporating public knowledge, addressing the question, **whose knowledge counts in climate justice?**

What does climate justice look like?



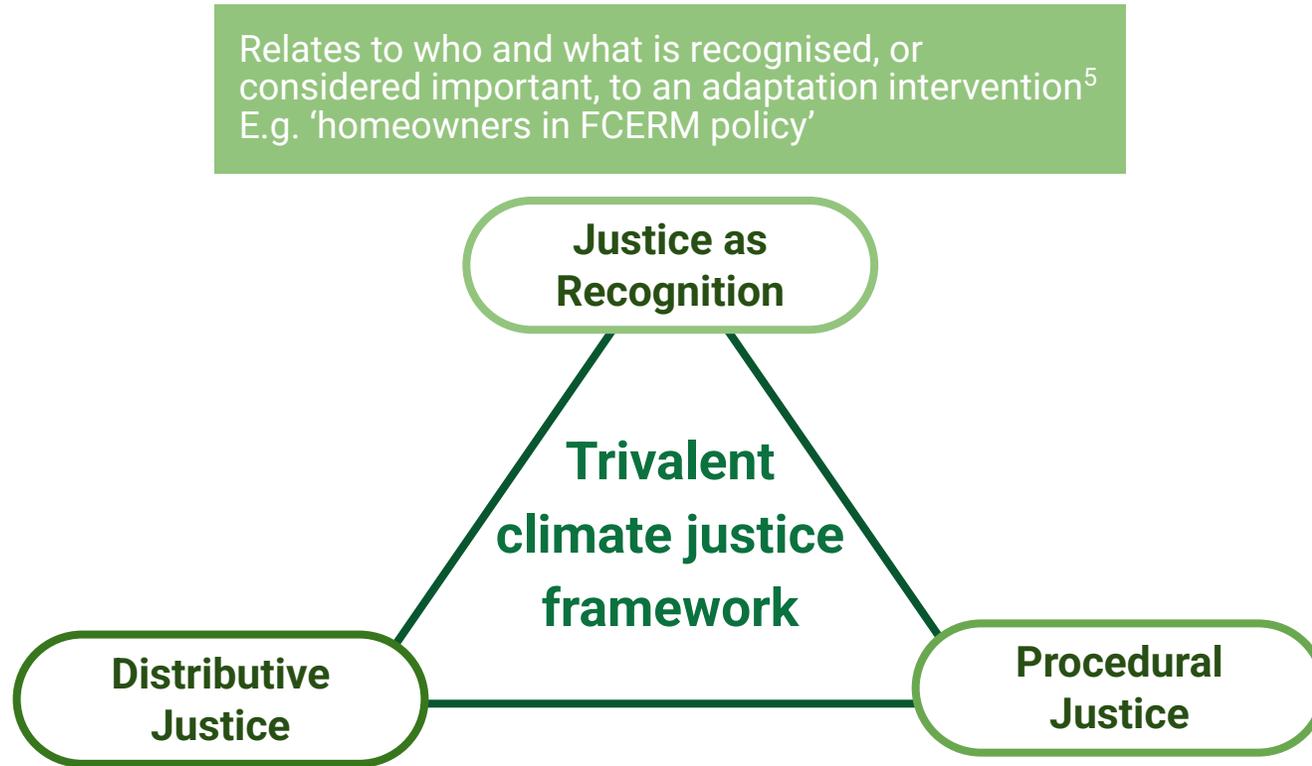
Image credit: google slides stock gif

Climate justice supporters posit that *the people most affected by climate change are the least responsible for emissions, and have the least capacity to respond.*

I argue that people most affected also *have experiential knowledge about living with climate impacts*⁴

A key challenge is how to operationalise climate justice for climate adaptation.

Theoretical starting point: trivalent climate justice



Operationalising climate justice: approach

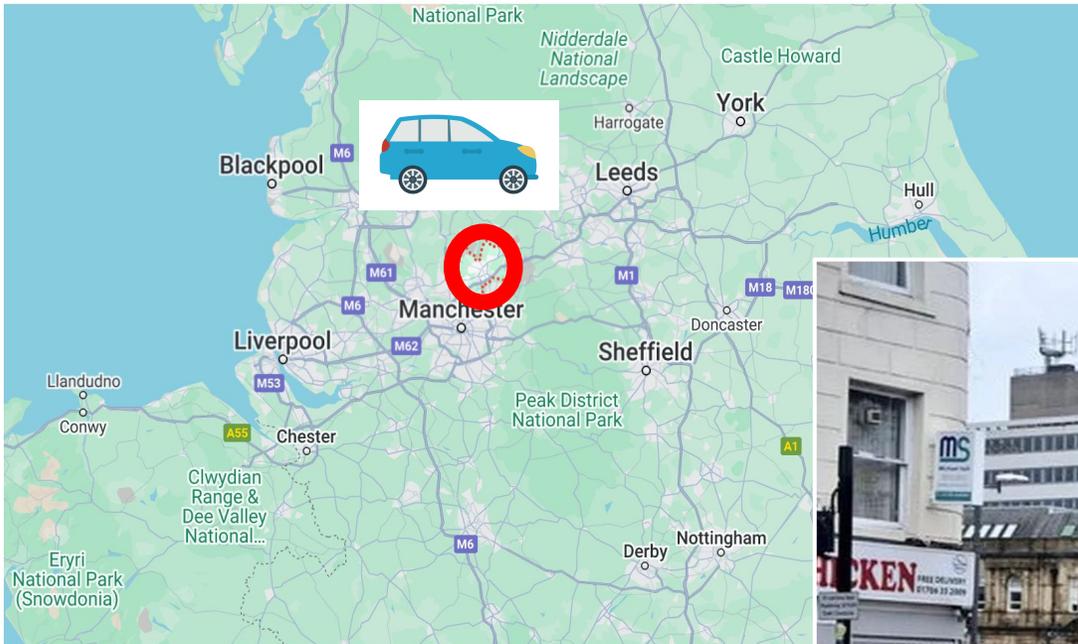


Image credit: [Google Maps](#)



Image credit: [Manchester Evening News](#)



Operationalising climate justice: findings

Residents

- alignment with literature on flooding/disasters as socially constructed
- active and autonomous - mutual aid, recovery, navigating governance

Professionals

- consultation challenges - 'angry publics'
- effectiveness of partnership approaches,
- challenges in aligning investment works and capital schemes,
- emotional toll of the work

Both

- Challenges of identifying/allocating responsibility in real events which are a mix of river water, drainage, surface water - leads to inertia
- the valued of thoughtful and reliable relationships - 'feeling listened to'

Operationalising climate justice: trivalent findings

Justice as Recognition

- residents generally recognised as affected, but not as holders of knowledge.
- recognition a political process which is shaped by gatekeepers,
- actions of recognising in one instance may be undone elsewhere.

Procedural Justice

- analysis considered communication, decision-making, learning, access to information,
- multiple procedural concerns highlighted by participants,
- causes of interactional challenges were often not clear and particular outcomes could have been related to cognitive or procedural concerns,
- lack of clarity in certain examples suggest that transparency could be improved.

Capabilities

- participants had different experiences, mostly negative and some positive - impacts on health, play, relationships, political autonomy,
- flood governance actors' personal views are also important since they were affected by doing the work of flood risk management

Trivalent troubles: locating the theoretical gap

Climate justice posits that *the people most affected by climate change are the least responsible for emissions, (have experiential knowledge about living with climate impacts), and have the least capacity to respond.*

Empirical findings demonstrated that:

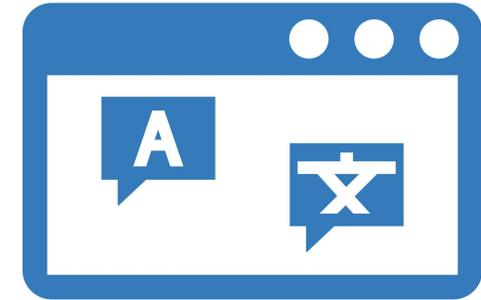
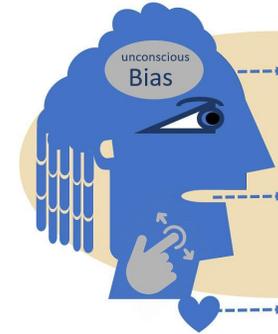
- Residents have experiential knowledge which challenges policy problematisation
 - Therefore they do have a type of expert knowledge - although it can be fallible
- Residents' views are not incorporated other than through professional gatekeeping
 - Yet climate justice claims to centre the views of people most impacted
- Some professionals experience emotional toll of their technical expertise
 - People doing 'the work' of adaptation could also be considered most impacted

Developing the trivalent climate justice theory

Epistemic Justice⁸

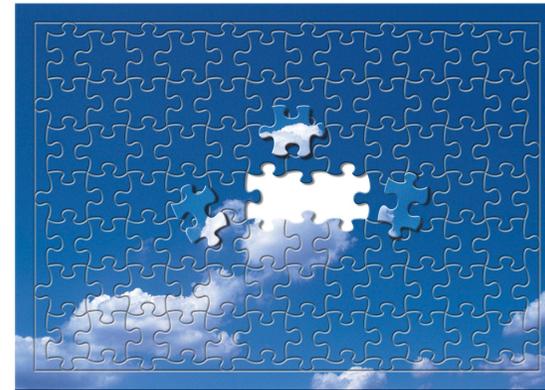
Testimonial injustice

- prejudice
- relational



Hermeneutical injustice

- ability to understand self
- structural



Epistemic injustice in practise: publics

Testimonial rather than hermeneutical - these participants understand their experiences and the floodscape around them, but aren't valued as experts:

“When it first started to flood, it was a big thing ... now it's [an even bigger impact]. Climate change has made a massive difference” (Kathy)

“The rain is just coming down too fast ... it's coming up through the manholes, it's coming up through the drains in our property. It's coming up through the sinks, it's going into the washing machine, and then it's coming through the house like a river” (Maureen)

“the drains that come off the hillside and from the culverts, they go underneath the carpark and then they come out into the brook...[when it's too full,] the water from the hillside can't really get into the brook” (Brenda)

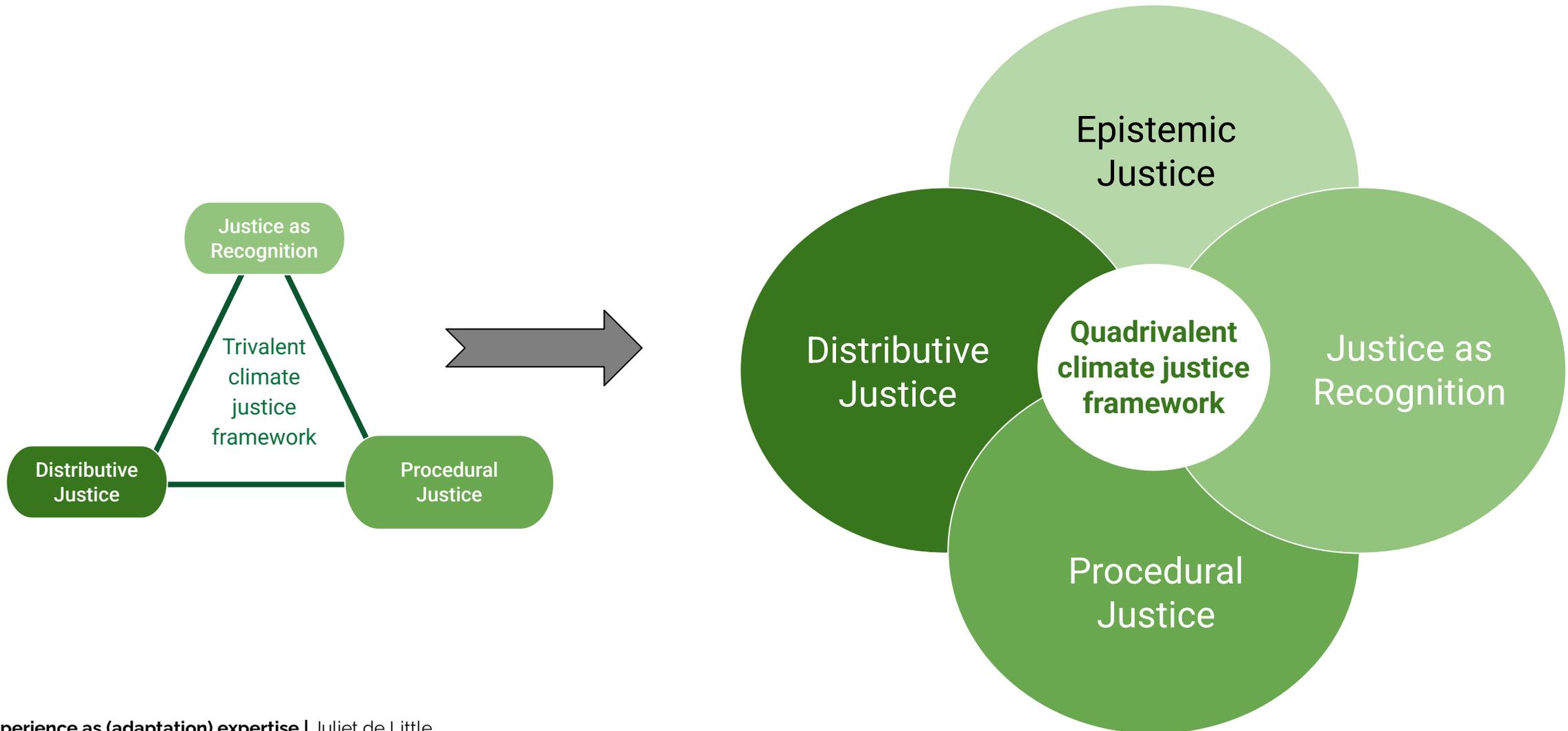
“Before, [there was] never any water in my drive, but when they build new properties, they build new roads. There's nowhere for the bloody water to go is there?” (Ian)

Epistemic injustice in practise: risk managers

Some examples where the RMAs demonstrated barriers to testimonial justice:

- Believing that the public have valuable experiential knowledge
 - “Community groups **are very good at lobbying...**” (RMA)
- Having the resources to engage meaningfully
 - “true community engagement is not just going out and give them a bit of consultation. **It's really, really working with them**” (RMA)
- Communication skills for discussing complex issues managed by complex partnerships
 - “All of these issues are project issues... but **sometimes it's difficult to explain that to the public**” (RMA)

Extending the theory



Implications of a quadrivalent framework

Theoretical

Climate justice theory **accounts for experiential knowledge and problem framing**, so interventions are focused on those most impacted

Methodological

- researcher must be explicit as a fallible knower themselves
- challenges in managing fallibilities and contested perspectives

Practical

- practitioners must engage with the public as expert knowers
- practitioners could explore their own epistemic positions

Conclusion

- trivalent climate justice theory falls short of centering those most impacted - through a lack valuing their experience
- the addition of epistemic justice refocuses climate justice towards its central aim, and values the experiences of climate adaptation workers
- operationalising climate justice, specifically the trivalent framework (including epistemic justice) offers new insights but is not without challenges.



Thank you for listening!

Thanks also to the Environment Agency, from where I am on sabbatical to develop this paper

and to the Priestley Centre for Climate Futures, for hosting me as a visiting fellow.

References

1. Climate Change Committee, *Progress in adapting to climate change: 2025 report to Parliament*, ONLINE, 2025
2. Sheng, X., Chisadza, C., Gupta, R. et al. *Climate shocks and wealth inequality in the UK: evidence from monthly data*. Environ Sci Pollut Res 30, 77771–77783 (2023)
3. Paavola, J. *Health impacts of climate change and health and social inequalities in the UK*. Environ Health 16 (Suppl 1), 113 (2017).
4. Juliet de Little, *Operationalising climate justice: a case study of experiences of flooding and flood governance in Rochdale Borough*, Doctoral thesis. 2023.
5. See e.g. Schlosberg, D. (2012) 'Climate Justice and Capabilities: A Framework for Adaptation Policy', Ethics & International Affairs, 26(4), pp. 445–461.
6. See e.g. Burnham, M. et al. (2013) Extending a geographic lens towards climate justice, part 1: climate change characterization and impacts, Geography Compass.
7. See e.g. Holland, B. (2008) 'Justice and the Environment in Nussbaum's "Capabilities Approach"; Why Sustainable Ecological Capacity Is a Meta-Capability', Political Research Quarterly, 61(2), pp. 319–332. doi: 10.1177/1065912907306471.
8. Fricker, M. (2007) Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing. online. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198237907.001.000>

Q & A

Structured discussion:
**(How) Do these ideas
resonate with your
work and experiences?**

Discussion

Based on the paper, and the expertise in this virtual room, start to address some of the opportunities and challenges highlighted by epistemic justice.

Consider two different groups (10 mins each):

- the public as experts of flood impact experiences
- flood risk managers as experts of 'doing climate adaptation'

Discussion: public as (experiential) experts

Aim of the task: explore the potential for including public as an expert (in contrast to as a consultee)

Prompts:

- Share examples where members of the public have demonstrated relevant experiential knowledge for climate adaptation
- Have there been elements that are questionable, or unknown? Have different members of the public, or groups, held views in opposition?
- What uses might there be for this type of work in your field?

“If the weather comes from the East, it tends to drop all the rain on the Calder catchment area...If the weather is coming from the west, it tends to drop all the rain on our side of the Pennines” (Matthew)

“Every time it rains, you look out the window. Which way is it going to go? [You] have a peek over the river and see what level the water is” (Azeem)

Discussion: professionals as (emotional) experts

Informal conversations on emotional toll of the work, and how sustainable it is. Feelings of a lack of progress and working with the same flooded people over time

“At the end of the day, it’s the person who’s getting flooded that you’re actually trying to work with - it’s not a numbers game” Professional, lead local flood authority

Aim of the task: explore the emotional toll of climate adaptation work and relevance for policy

Prompts:

- If comfortable to, an invitation to share examples where you or colleagues have felt an emotional strain, or not, from the work of thinking through or delivering climate adaptation. Alternatively, offer a speculation as to what this might include.
- How do emotional impacts intersect with abilities to deliver the work?
- What might change if emotional impacts were recognised in work planning?