

Case Study

## Big Energy Shift

### A dialogue on public views about community level carbon and energy savings

#### Vital statistics

**Commissioning body:**

The Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC)

**Duration of process:**

15 months: March 2008 - June 2009

**Number of public participants:** 250

**Number of experts/stakeholders involved:**

Oversight panel members = 26  
Other stakeholders / experts = 52

**Cost of project:**

£788,000 total,  
Sciencewise funding = £381,000

*The UK has introduced the world's first long-term, legally binding framework to tackle climate change and is aiming for an 80% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, compared to 1990 levels. One implication of a target of this scale could require virtually eliminating emissions from our homes. In the light of this, the Big Energy Shift public dialogue project was designed to establish the basis on which people would be prepared to take up energy savings, renewable and low carbon measures. It was designed to enable public participants to discuss the way they insulate, heat and power their homes and communities. The project was intended to inform policy makers on public views about community-level carbon and energy savings.*

#### Key messages from the public

- There is huge potential for people to change their energy behaviour. Participant attitudes towards improving energy efficiency in homes, and about low carbon and renewable energy technologies were extremely positive
- Householders want to maintain their quality of life with a secure supply of affordable energy. To capture people's positive mood for change, the Big Energy Shift needs to offer people the prospect of a win-win situation where, for instance, they can have their hot showers and cut their carbon emissions
- Individuals alone were not likely to initiate change to stimulate a Big Energy Shift. Bold leadership from Government was said to be needed including setting clear goals, a deadline for achieving them, and what individuals, Government

and businesses all need to do to get there. Government leadership was also said to be required to ensure that systems are in place to help people with the financial burden of investing in new energy technologies

- Participants felt that the first steps to a Big Energy Shift should be to explain clearly to people the issues at hand and their relevance to the general public.

#### Policy influence

- The Big Energy Shift dialogue fed directly into the development of the Low Carbon Communities Challenge (LCCC), which is investing £10 million over two years in 22 pilot communities that will test a range of energy developments in different types of community. The LCCC was launched in September 2009 by the Secretary of State

- The project has ensured that public dialogue has become much more important to DECC and how it achieves its objectives
- The findings of the project are reported to have fed into the following policies:
  - Trials of **pay-as-you-save**
  - The roll out of **smart meters**
  - The **Renewable Energy Strategy**, particularly public engagement around large-scale renewables and the 'green challenge'
  - The **Heat and Energy Saving Strategy**, particularly the case for pilots and learning on the ground
- Improved policy and decision-making - gaining access to a wider range of views than is usual in policy development (i.e. from the public) created stronger evidence that helped to achieve a more robust decision.



## Background

In 2008, 27% of emissions in the UK came from energy use within households. Reducing domestic energy was seen as a fundamental part of contributing to the Government's target of an 80% reduction in greenhouse gases by 2050. DECC concluded that Government needed to have a good understanding of how far people were prepared to contribute and get involved so that it could make informed policy decisions in response to the Climate Change Bill and its targets.

The close connection to evolving policy around behaviour change to reduce domestic energy consumption ensured that the dialogue had strong support and endorsement from Government Ministers at the time. The project received significant media coverage as well as being considered a high-profile dialogue in DECC given that the potential results had far-reaching implications for Government policy.

## The dialogue activities

The objectives of the dialogue were to:

- Test out the public's views on community-level carbon and energy savings
- Enable UK Government to make fully informed policy decisions in response to the proposals in the Climate Change Bill.

The dialogue sought to understand:

- What range of policy measures proposed by the Government was more or less attractive to people and what mix of incentives, regulation, information and advice, or other measures, may tip the balance for them to take up or support various options
- Whether there were alternative measures suggested by the public that would meet DECC's objectives
- How people viewed the inter-relationships between decisions about their homes and communities, and wider national debates and/or policy interventions
- How people viewed the inter-relationships between energy efficiency, heat and renewable energy (e.g. what sort of disruption householders were willing to endure and at what price?)
- How responses differed according to socio-economics, property type and community.

About 250 public participants were involved from nine neighbourhoods in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. They discussed Government plans for a big shift in how people's houses and communities are insulated, heated and powered. This dialogue project took place in parallel with formal consultations on the Heat and Energy Strategy and Renewable Energy Strategy being prepared. The four stages in the dialogue were as follows:

**Stage 1:** The first (full day) event brought participants together to learn about new energy technologies and energy efficiency from a range of energy and technology experts, who were on hand to explain and answer any questions

**Stage 2:** The second stage enabled participants to view some of the technology options first-hand and consider how these might work in their own homes and communities, as well as review how they used energy in their homes (including keeping an 'energy diary')

**Stage 3:** The third event brought the participants back together for another full day, along with other stakeholders including local non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This was to discuss the best course of action at the individual, community, regional and national level; the possible role of the Government; and the underlying principles and values of the approach that the Government needed to adopt

**Stage 4:** The fourth stage saw three participants from each of the nine areas attend a final meeting in London to discuss their recommendations with other stakeholders and policy makers

The second stage of activities worked especially well to increase knowledge of the options, and the level of engagement in these activities demonstrated high levels of interest and commitment from participants. The third event worked very effectively to enable final discussions, agreement and presentation of the conclusions. Stakeholders at the third event were largely locally based and working in very practical ways, which was valued by participants. The fourth stage was considered less successful as there were too few public participants compared to stakeholders, which changed the dynamics of the event and reduced the presence of the public voice at that stage.

The DECC project manager and the project partners developed an extensive range of positive relationships with many internal (DECC) and external stakeholders. Formal links were established through the formal oversight panel, the Energy Engagement Working Group (EEWG), which had 26 members (16 from Government and 10 representing external stakeholder groups). The role of this Group was to advise on materials as well as on links to policy.

### Summary of good practice and innovation

- Ministerial involvement provided high-level endorsement for the dialogue from beginning to end
- The inclusion of external stakeholders on the oversight panel was unusual, and was welcomed by Government policy makers as well as external stakeholders
- There was clarity of purpose and scope
- There were clear links to related parallel policy developments. Links maintained with formal consultations on the Heat and Energy Saving Strategy, and the Renewable Energy Strategy allowed a clear route for findings from the dialogue to be fed into those systems
- The four-stage process allowed participants to have time to develop their knowledge of the issues and discuss the implications with each other before coming to conclusions
- Strong communications were evident throughout the project. This was particularly evident at, and after, the end of the project when, for example, a letter was sent to all public participants signed by the Minister to inform them about the LCCC and let them know that their input had been used to design that new initiative
- The whole consultation process was open, flexible and collaborative
- A formal 'wash-up' meeting was held after the end of the project and when the draft evaluation report was available. This meeting helped those involved share, agree and consolidate learning in the team, and capture that learning for the future.

### Lessons for future practice include:

- It takes time for the public to digest new information and use it to come to conclusions. There needs to be a balance between information giving and discussion
- Scientists and stakeholders need to stay for the duration of the event they are involved in. Leaving early impacts on motivation and on the status of the event in the eyes of the participant
- Stakeholders may question the validity of the results of dialogue if they feel the sample is too small (e.g. in this case, the overall project was seen to be sufficiently 'large-scale', although stage four was not) and the participants are not 'typical' (e.g. in this case, once the participants were 'informed' they were no longer typical)

- Attending events with the public increased stakeholder trust in the findings (especially stages/events one and three in this case)
- It is important that facilitators are seen as independent of any particular views on the subject under discussion
- The quality of the small group facilitation needs to be consistently high to ensure the full range of views are heard and recorded.

### Impacts

Policy impacts are covered on the first page of this summary. This section examines the impacts on all the participants in the process.

#### Influence on policy makers and policy organisations

- Policy makers learnt new and different types of communication approaches that would be effective with the public
- The project confirmed to DECC 'the willingness of citizens to accept and play a part in step changes in energy production and consumption', and that contact with the public can be positive and constructive.

#### Impacts on public participants

- Participants' confidence in whether the public views from this project would make a difference to Government policy grew from 58% to 79% over the course of the project. The presence of Ministers at events had a positive impact
- There was a significant increase from stages one to three in the numbers believing that individuals should be responsible for technologies in the home and that communities should be responsible for technologies in their areas
- 99% of participants said they had learnt something from the project (after stage three). They had found out about technologies they did not know about before, how technologies worked, where to go to find out more, and payment options and delivery methods
- Evaluation interviewees reported making small changes in their own energy use, such as switching off the lights and turning down the thermostat.

#### Impacts on scientists/experts and other stakeholders

- Stakeholders gained a better understanding of how public dialogue worked and could be used in the future
- Positive feedback on these sorts of public dialogue activity was seen to help build personal reputations and careers
- New and stronger networks were established between stakeholders and Government, including starting to consider each other as allies
- The dialogue challenged stakeholder assumptions including the emphasis given by the public to the Government's role in regulation and the need for extensive support if people are to install new technologies in their homes.

“ How far dialogue leads and how far it runs along with what is happening is uncertain. Big Energy Shift might not have caused all the impacts, but it certainly helped. ”

**Policy maker, interview from evaluation study**

“ Pretty much everything will have to change over a period of time and if we're going to do that then sensibly we need to know to what extent we can bring the public with us. We can't just do it ourselves. The public are part of it. ”

**Former Minister of State, DECC**

“ You do feel that you were actually sending a message directly to the Government and that it's being listened to. ”

**Public participant**

“ It has opened my eyes to the possibilities. ”

**Stakeholder, interview from evaluation study**

## Overall impacts

The Big Energy Shift dialogue is considered by DECC to be a very successful project. It has directly impacted policy and led to the development of the LCCC and an investment of £10 million in 22 communities. LCCC is a research and delivery programme that provides financial and advisory support to 'test bed' communities across England, Wales and Northern Ireland that are seeking to cut carbon emissions.

The results of the dialogue project provided many practical insights on how to achieve low carbon targets, which has enabled UK Government to make more fully informed policy decisions in response to the proposals in the Climate Change Bill.

A further impact of the project is that it also helped to change the views and behaviour of many of the public, Government and stakeholder participants.

## Contacts and links

### Commissioning body

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### Reports

Full project and evaluation reports available from Sciencewise-ERC on [www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/the-big-energy-shift/](http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/the-big-energy-shift/)