

Case Study

Trajectories for carbon emission reductions

A public dialogue to better inform how to meet UK carbon budgets

Vital statistics

Commissioning body:

Committee on Climate Change (CCC)

Duration of process:

9 months: August 2013 – April 2014

Total public participants involved:

25

Total stakeholders involved: 8

Total experts involved in events:

3 speakers across the three events

Cost of project:

£43,500 total,
Sciencewise co-funding = £21,700

In 2011, the Government set the level of the Fourth Carbon Budget, which covers the years 2023-2027. This budget was set in line with advice from the Committee on Climate Change (CCC), to reflect the cost-effective path to meeting the target in the Climate Change Act – to reduce emissions by at least 80% relative to 1990 levels by 2050. On this pathway, the budget committed the UK to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the mid-2020s by 50% on 1990 levels.

When the Government set the budget, it also committed to a Review, for which it also needed to obtain CCC advice – the CCC is an independent statutory body under the Climate Change Act 2008.

Under the Act, the CCC is required to have 'regard to the desirability of involving the public in the exercise of its functions'. The public dialogue project was set up to feed into development of the Committee's advice, focused on evidence of how the budget could be met and the impacts this could have for other criteria specified in the Act, such as fuel poverty and competitiveness. This advice was published in November 2013 (covering evidence on climate science and international and EU circumstances) and December 2013 (covering the cost-effective path to the 2050 target). This second part of the Committee's advice took into account the results of the public dialogue.

This demonstrated that an effective, deliberative public dialogue could be achieved on a complex issue within a tight timescale by working with a panel of public participants meeting three times in four days.

Policy maker view

“The dialogue demonstrated that members of the public were keen to engage on issues around climate change, and in particular on the means and costs of meeting the UK's carbon budgets. They were supportive of UK leadership, as well as providing insights on specific measures. It was reassuring that, in general, they understood and supported the CCC's emerging narrative on emissions reduction for the fourth carbon budget.... It has raised the question for us about whether we should be doing more on behaviour change and factoring this into our analyses and projections.”

CCC interviewee.

Influence on policy and policy makers

The outcomes of the public dialogue influenced the second part of the CCC's formal advice to the Government on the 4th Carbon Budget, which was published in December 2013. The dialogue is referenced in the CCC's main advice to Government, while the panel's six key recommendations are outlined in full in a supporting Technical Report.



Background

The CCC is required to take into account a number of matters specified in the Climate Change Act when providing advice in relation to carbon budgets. These include scientific knowledge about climate change, relevant technology, and economic and social circumstances. While public understanding of climate change is not directly identified as a separate matter to consider, it clearly plays into the acceptability of carbon budgets and how they are met, including around the science, costs and views about specific technologies. Therefore, it is an important consideration in CCC's work.

Previous CCC advice has reflected assessment of relevant science, economics and technology issues. This has provided evidence as to the potential availability and costs of abatement. It has also fed into assumed trajectories for the implementation and take-up of measures.

Financial and non-financial barriers to take-up have been part of that assessment, depending on technology. Nevertheless, there remain wider issues around the acceptability of costs to the public and attitudes to new technologies. These include discussions on the climate problem generally, whether the UK should take a leading role in tackling a global problem, and understanding of energy price and bill implications.

This dialogue project was intended to provide further insights into public acceptability of climate policies and their accompanying impacts, and to feed into the CCC's advice to the Government on the most appropriate level for the 4th Carbon Budget.

The Committee concluded that many of the points raised in the public dialogue were consistent with the developing CCC approach. However, the reflection of these in the deliberation confirmed and increased the CCC's confidence in their thinking and direction of travel. It also indicated approaches and technologies where participants were enthusiastically supportive (e.g. the international leadership provided by the UK in this field, and heat pumps), and where the public were more cautious (e.g. carbon capture and storage (CCS)).

In addition, the dialogue report has sparked further internal discussion, including in relation to future research needs, and is likely to inform other forthcoming reports to Government.

“ Next July we have to do a progress report for Government about the success of measures and so on, and we could potentially feed some of the findings into that. Some of the messages that came out about the need to engage and acceptance of certain measures are probably more relevant to that review than a discussion about the 4th Carbon Budget. ”

CCC interviewee.

Key messages from the participants

As part of the dialogue process, the public formulated recommendations for consideration by the Committee on Climate Change as part of the review of the 4th Carbon Budget, including:

- Greater public debate and engagement on the sorts of measures the Committee is considering in the 4th Carbon Budget review
- Education at all levels on climate change and carbon emission reductions

“ A simple education [programme] to explain to us how climate change will actually affect our lives in England and then worldwide. ”

Public participant.

- Acting now by investing in safe, renewable energy sources
- Incentivising positive contributions by individuals and business in the form of grants and tax breaks

“ Climate change is a global problem which needs to be tackled now and [progress on this] cannot be slowed by money, funding. ”

Public participant.

- Keeping data up to date and using current data to inform policy advice
- The issue of climate change is too important to be swayed by party politics and independent advice followed by legislation, as necessary, is essential.

“ I am very confident that the recommendations that the group made will be included in the CCC's advice to Government in the 4th Carbon Budget because of the feedback we were given by members of the CCC in the panel presentation at the end. And all the speakers and members that I met appeared to be very genuine, professional and possessed integrity. ”

Public participant.

The dialogue activities

The key objectives for the public dialogue were for the CCC to learn more about:

- Public understanding of the global climate change challenge and acceptability of the risks of global climate change compared to the costs of global action
- Public views of the UK's role and responsibility within global action, their understanding of what the UK and others are doing, and tolerance for the risks of the UK moving first, compared to the benefits
- Public understanding of and attitudes to energy bill impacts of UK action, including evidence on whether the public understand what has driven price changes historically, understanding of what may happen to prices/bills in future and the possible trade-offs between higher but stable prices, or lower but more volatile prices, and how public acceptability of the case for action is impacted by levels of expected cost
- Public understanding of, and attitudes towards, the wider implications of UK action to provide an insight into whether the CCC's rationale for budget levels - e.g. small economic costs with potential to mitigate competitiveness concerns, potential for increased energy security, UK contribution to insurance against potentially catastrophic climate change - is accepted as a reasonably balanced approach
- Whether the public think the case for UK action has changed significantly since the 4th Carbon Budget was legislated in June 2011. For example, do they think the recession and its impact in reducing emissions should lead to a lowering or tightening of long-term ambition?

The public dialogue took the form of three panel discussions held in London over a four-day period in October 2013 with the same 25 members of the public attending each event. The first two events were in the evening and the final event was on a Saturday. Each event lasted between 3 and 3½ hours.

For the Committee to make use of the dialogue findings in its advice to Government on the review of the 4th Carbon Budget, the whole dialogue process, including preparation of materials in collaboration with a project Oversight Group, took place within a six-week timescale. The design for the public dialogue adopted elements of the Citizen's Jury model. To enable deep engagement with the issues, the dialogue participants formed a panel that was supported through several stages of work. This started by exploring the context of carbon emission reductions and moved on to making recommendations to the CCC to inform its review of the Government's 4th Carbon Budget. Before the first event, public participants were provided with four short think pieces to introduce them to the challenges of the issues before they considered them in the face-to-face sessions. The think pieces were on: what the science is telling us about climate change; a global challenge; UK plans for carbon emission reductions; and implications of UK action.

The events contained a mixture of plenary sessions and small-group break-out sessions, where the 25 participants were allocated randomly to three mini groups. The facilitation team worked with the same small groups of panel members over the course of the three events. Therefore, panel members had an opportunity to become familiar with each other's views, work together on solutions and proposals, and feel they were in a trusted situation with fellow panel members and their facilitators.

The final event culminated in a session where a selection of participants presented, on behalf of their group, a series of recommendations to the CCC attendees. After each presentation, one of the CCC experts responded directly to these recommendations.

After the events, the delivery contractor's final communications with participants provided them with links to the dialogue report and the CCC's advice to Government, all of which were published on the same day.

What worked especially well

The dialogue was effectively designed and delivered overall, with numerous elements of good practice that are not necessarily present in other dialogue projects. For example, the think pieces were concise, accessible and sent out in advance, so participants could start to absorb the initial briefing early. Similarly, the presentations by specialists and other supporting materials were very well received. The reconvening of participants three times over four days created significant momentum. All participants stayed involved for all these events, which demonstrated a high level of enthusiasm and commitment; this was also reflected in positive feedback from participants. The final session, provided direct interaction between the participants and the CCC during which time the panel's recommendations were presented and the CCC responded.

“ The three different sessions worked well. If it was all done on one day it would have been too long and there would have been far too much information to digest in one go. I think doing it this way gave everyone the opportunity to get to know each other and relax enabling people to speak openly about their views. ”

Public participant.

The dynamic of the events was particularly notable and, in particular, the openness of the discussion between participants as peers as well as with stakeholders in the room. The dialogue empowered participants to be comfortable and able to engage with the subject matter on an equal footing with others. These successes are all the more impressive in light of the extremely challenging timescale constraints.

What worked less well

The evaluation highlights three aspects that could have strengthened the project further.

Firstly, the project timescale was a significant constraint and had a series of impacts, from materials development and speaker availability through to the establishment and functioning of the Oversight Group. On the latter, the timings precluded input from external organisations and, to some extent, set up a two-tier process. The working relationships of the Oversight Group were likely to have been improved had there been sufficient time for them to convene together from the outset and make decisions collectively.

Secondly, there was a desire among participants for more direct engagement with stakeholders in the room, rather than through the facilitators. This was most evident in terms of the time allocated to speaker Q&A and, such was the success of the final panel debate, participants would have liked this session to be extended a little.

Finally, the style of the dialogue was very effective at creating a participant-led agenda, and one in which participants were clearly comfortable engaging with stakeholders. However, it is likely that a slightly more directed final session, which was linked back to some of CCC's original questions for the dialogue, could have delivered some more specific outcomes.

Contact Details

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Reports

Full project and evaluation reports available from Sciencewise on www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/trajectories-for-carbon-emission-reductions/