

Case Study

Low Carbon Communities Challenge

Vital statistics

Commissioning bodies:

Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC); Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Northern Ireland); Welsh Assembly

Duration of process:

30 months: September 2009 – March 2012

Number of public participants:

Varies by community from about 70 to 750

Cost of project:

£587,200 total,
Sciencewise funding = £186,100

The Low Carbon Communities Challenge (LCCC) was a £10 million two-year Department of Energy & Climate Change (DECC) programme which ran between 2009 and 2012. It was funded by DECC; the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Northern Ireland); the Welsh Assembly; and the Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre (Sciencewise-ERC). The LCCC provided financial and advisory support to 22 communities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and aimed to test the community-scale implementation of low carbon technologies in parallel with community engagement and behaviour change initiatives. Sciencewise co-funded specific activities designed to support community engagement alongside review and learning, especially to feed into and influence future national energy efficiency and low carbon generation policies.

Key messages from the public

There were several strands of evaluation for the LCCC programme as a whole, which drew on different sources of feedback from the public. The following summarises the key messages on the nature of the LCCC programme:

- Lack of time was frequently mentioned, both in terms of the application process and project delivery. This had implications for the projects' ability to undertake engagement and shared learning. Some projects, however, said that the LCCC provided a focus and forced them to prioritise their time
- The minimal administrative bureaucracy associated with the LCCC was welcomed by projects, particularly in light of the amount of time that projects needed to dedicate to other aspects of project management and delivery
- DECC's 'hands-off' approach was welcomed by some projects who felt it aligned with a 'bottom-up' ethos and signalled a degree of trust. Others, however, equated it to a lack of support, particularly in relation to the challenges around funding
- The concept of providing help through a Specialist Support Team (SST) was considered sound. However, the nature of the support offered fell short of the requirements of LCCC projects. These tended to require more practical, bespoke and advanced levels of support, not least to address specific problems (e.g. with the planning system, legal advice (including on organisational structures) and procurement)
- The LCCC Steering Group was considered an important forum with a diverse membership. Some felt that it could have been more effective with a rotating chairperson, an opportunity for non-DECC members to set the agenda and a clearer Terms of Reference. Some stakeholders and project teams felt that the LCCC lacked a clear focus and did not articulate exactly what it was designed to achieve
- Many local projects benefitted from working in partnership, which often meant that specialist skills and services could be accessed in-kind or at a lower cost. Local authority and third-sector-led projects tended to be better resourced and had easier access to guidance, but found community engagement more challenging. Community groups felt more able to engage the wider community and bring about behaviour change but felt more exposed to risk (especially around planning and legal issues)
- Projects learnt a lot about the performance of low carbon technologies and their appropriateness for different building types. Several projects favoured technologies with a visual appeal (to contribute to wider behaviour change), which diverted projects' focus away from energy efficiency
- All projects described a steep learning curve. Many did note though that these challenges had encouraged them to innovate and that others could benefit from their experiences. Most projects valued the opportunities to share learning, although some activities were considered more useful – particularly those that brought practitioners and policy makers together (e.g. customer closeness visits, thematic policy workshops)



Background

The LCCC originated from DECC's Big Energy Shift, a large-scale public dialogue involving nine energy forums across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and supported by Sciencewise¹. Each forum comprised 25-30 members of the public working alongside a number of stakeholders. This dialogue highlighted the potential benefits of providing households with integrated 'packages' of low carbon measures and support, delivered locally in the community.

In response, the LCCC was designed to focus on communities that were already taking action (e.g. they may have been a Warm Zone, eco-town or low carbon community, or a potential candidate for community-scale retrofitting of homes). It sought a broad 40:60 split between 'first mover' communities (i.e. those already recognised as exemplars for their carbon reduction plans) and 'second movers' (i.e. with less experience, but clear intentions and emerging plans of action for cutting carbon emissions and increasing sustainability). The LCCC provided the 22 communities with funding of £450,000 on average, of which at least 90% was allocated for expenditure on capital measures. Communities were also given access to support services and a common framework to share learning.

- Many projects felt the additional engagement support added value. Several projects faced resistance in their community, which they believed might have been avoided had they consulted the community from the outset. The perceived 'fairness' of the distribution of benefits across the community was a key issue
- Financial savings were an important initial 'hook' to engage local communities. However, once involved people were motivated more by a sense of community and social interaction. Visible measures sparked interest and instilled confidence, with some households saying they explored solar panels after seeing neighbours or 'people like them' install them. Households also mentioned the importance of 'trusted local advisers' or 'go to' local residents who had already had the measures installed.
- The DECC Minister has stated that "Community engagement in the energy sector will be vital to our vision of the development of energy in the UK in the coming decades" (DECC Community Energy Online Portal, November 2012). Examples of this renewed focus include:
 - The Local Energy Assessment Fund (LEAF), announced in December 2011, demonstrated continued commitment to community energy projects. LEAF was a £10 million programme covering 236 communities
 - The results of the LCCC programme were passed to the Green Deal team. From 2013, there was to be a greater emphasis on the role of communities in the Green Deal which provides loans for energy efficiency measures, including a pack to enable the delivery of Green Deal through communities
 - Information from the LCCC was used to feed into DECC's development of proposals for an enhanced role for community groups in energy efficiency activities related to smart metering. DECC has also noted the important role of community organisations in delivering effective consumer engagement.

Policy influence

The LCCC led to a range of different impacts at local level (see below). In terms of national policy influence and while recognising that such policy is developed as the result of many influences and cannot be seen as the result of a single programme or process, the LCCC programme has been seen to influence and impact on policy thinking and new priorities, including:

- Learning from the LCCC programme fed into the development of a DECC Community Energy Strategy to be published in 2013. This includes the experience of working with stakeholders through a steering group, which has fed into the development of the Community Energy Contact Group set up by the Minister

The dialogue activities

Overall, the LCCC was expected to provide the following:

- A better understanding of the scale of reduction in carbon emissions and energy demand that could be achieved within local communities from the development of integrated community support packages, and the contribution that this could make to delivering carbon reductions of 34% (by 2020, relative to 1990 levels) and to the UK's renewable energy target that 15% of energy comes from renewable sources by 2020.

¹ See www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/the-big-energy-shift/

- A better understanding of the nature of the blueprint or support packages required to achieve these reductions. These would inform policy development and delivery in relation to the carbon budgets and renewable energy delivery at the community scale
- Some understanding of the broader social and economic impacts of these community support packages – for example, through reduced fuel bills or other household savings, effects on inward investment and social enterprise, and improved social cohesion and community leadership.

The dialogue activity took the form of a co-inquiry process that was delivered through planning and review meetings in each community, independently facilitated to: share learning to take forward local actions, to feed into future national policy, and to improve and learn from community engagement.

Facilitators provided engagement support to each LCCC project. They:

- Helped to organise and deliver engagement with the wider community. As each community had different engagement needs, facilitators worked with groups to review needs and local interests to create a bespoke engagement plan in the early stages of every project, followed by ongoing liaison between the group and the facilitator. Funding of up to £4,500 per community was provided for engagement activities
- Offered other support including training local groups to run wider meetings, facilitating development meetings with a range of stakeholders and providing advice
- Organised a review meeting in every LCCC project to share learning from the experience of delivering the project to develop a better understanding of the barriers, opportunities, decision-making and delivery processes on the ground. Depending on the progress made in the projects, the meetings focused on the experiences of the core project team or the project team and other community participants, such as residents with renewable technologies installed in their homes.

Summary of good practice and innovation:

Local project teams were very aware and appreciative of the opportunities to share learning throughout the LCCC programme. The following activities worked well:

- The majority of LCCC project teams participated in the Communities and Climate Action Alliance (CCAA) national conference in London in January 2011. The conference was part-funded by the LCCC to support wider sharing of experience and learning from the programme. The CCAA event attracted stakeholders from a wide range of national and local organisations to discuss the role for community action in tackling climate change and creating a low carbon society. The CCAA conference was felt to have provided valuable opportunities for local LCCC project teams to network, share learning with each other and feed learning to a wider group of stakeholders in the community energy sector
- Four national thematic policy workshops were held, which brought together individuals from relevant LCCC local project teams to share their practical experience with national policy makers from DECC in discussions of four themes: community scale renewables; marginalised and fuel-poor communities; domestic energy efficiency; and domestic microgeneration. Several local project teams felt the four thematic policy workshops provided them with a valuable opportunity to network with each other around a specific issue and to share their specific learning. They also highly valued the opportunity to meet face to face, and share learning, with DECC policy makers

- Four 'Customer closeness' visits were made to local project teams by DECC policy staff, with more visits planned for 2013. DECC employees, from a range of directorates, visited low carbon installations and met with project teams and other local people to explore their experiences of living and working with low carbon measures. These visits were valued by local project teams, and were seen as a valuable opportunity for policy makers to get an understanding of 'how things work on the ground' and for the work of communities to feed into policy-making. Local project teams felt strongly that visits gave policy makers a chance to see the impact of the LCCC project work on local communities and to hear about the issues they faced during the process. They also felt that the visits signalled DECC's support and commitment to the local project teams and to the community-led energy agenda
- Some projects took advantage of the video cameras (and briefing) supplied by LCCC to provide additional evidence for the final project evaluation in written or video footage format, providing another input to sharing learning
- Less successful approaches that were quickly learnt from included the online portal which was piloted over several months early in 2011 to enable local project groups to access information and share learning, including through webinars on different topics. The portal was not used extensively.

Lessons for future practice

The co-inquiry approach to supporting dialogue within communities, and between communities, other stakeholders and national policy makers, was not implemented entirely in the ways originally envisaged when the LCCC programme was designed. The short timescales for completing the installation of often very new technologies put pressure on local project teams to make those physical development activities their priority. In addition, the lack of clarity about how the co-inquiry process of distributed dialogue linked to the development of engagement plans and formal review meetings, led to a focus at the time on immediate pressures rather than thinking about the longer term learning from the work. However, once the main installations were completed, many local project teams were very keen to share the knowledge and experience they had developed.

Impacts

Policy impacts are covered on the first page of this summary. The following explores the impacts on individual projects, the wider local communities and across the programme as a whole.

Impacts on projects

- Local project teams saw the LCCC grant as a catalyst that enabled their groups and communities to become more sustainable and self-sufficient as they began to generate and recycle their own resources – both the energy created and/or the financial resource being directed back to the established community trust or social enterprise for reinvestment in the community. Several projects developed new mechanisms (e.g. revolving funds) to convert one-off LCCC grant funding into a sustainable income stream
- Being approved as a LCCC local project team had enhanced the credibility and legitimacy of the local project team within their communities and with external stakeholders (including with elected members, officers, private business and private finance). This was felt to have a bearing on the delivery of the project and the impact it was able to achieve. It also enabled greater levels of partnership working, in turn increasing the projects' access to skills, resources and ideas

“ Policy workshops – the idea was for them [DECC] to learn from us. Was interesting to meet other people doing similar things and to hear the nitty gritty of how they have done things, that is interesting. ”

Local project team

“ When we had people from DECC, they met not just me working on the project, but the recipients and it's important for them to see [the kit that has] been put up and the experience of the recipients and some of the volunteers. ”

Local project team

- Local project groups also reported a significant increase in local engagement during and since the LCCC project, providing continuing support for their local work. Some teams found that the LCCC structure, combining local engagement with the physical development of very visible new low carbon energy facilities, encouraged the greater involvement of local people, especially those that project teams had previously found difficult to engage (e.g. teenagers and older residents)
- Quite a few of the projects set up a new social enterprise as a result of the LCCC and many developed new funding mechanisms, including through new organisational structures, typically forms of mutual such as Community Energy Companies, Community Interest Companies or Social Enterprise.

Impacts on wider community

- The LCCC programme increased awareness in local communities about local action on energy and climate change from 35% of households to 42%
- The LCCC programme led to a greater recognition of low carbon measures, with 77% of households in LCCC areas noticing at least one or two solar panels in their local area, up from 46% pre-LCCC (and over and above the increases seen nationally)
- The LCCC programme supported the normalisation of low carbon lifestyles, with an increase (48% to 55%) in the proportion who considered 'reducing your carbon footprint' to be normal (compared to an increase from 40% to 43% seen nationally)
- Although behaviour change was an important aspect of the LCCC, there is little evidence of widespread change in attitudes, behaviours or the uptake of low carbon measures. However, increased uptake of specific measures was evident in some communities (e.g. increases in loft insulation, solar photovoltaic (PV) to generate electricity and air source heat pumps)
- Some project teams suggested that their most positive outcomes were social, with a range of new activities emerging (e.g. residents' associations, community cinemas and orchards). It was also felt that community-scale installations acted as symbols of modernisation and 'things getting better' in the area. The local project teams reported a new 'confidence',

“ When you visit these communities it really affects you, you get a different view of how these [DECC] policies work on the ground. And trying to understand what community groups are trying to achieve there, in terms of improving the areas they live in. It is important for policy officials in DECC to go out and understand the impact of what they are doing. This is happening; we are arranging community visits for officials to go to the LCCCs. ”

Stakeholder, delivery team

'enthusiasm' and 'sense of pride' within communities and among residents, whether or not they were directly involved in the LCCC projects.

Impacts across the programme as a whole

- A total of 8,206 low carbon measures were delivered in LCCC areas, ranging from low energy light bulbs and boiler jackets to a 1.2MW biomass district heating system. The measures were installed on a range of building types (e.g. domestic, commercial and community). Some projects also incorporated additional measures, such as low carbon vehicles and car clubs, allotments and – in one project – a rainwater harvesting system
- Low carbon measures were installed that collectively represented a theoretical annual carbon saving of just over 3,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂).

Contact details

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Reports

Full project and evaluation reports available from Sciencewise-ERC on www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/low-carbon-communities-challenge/