

Consumers, Public Engagement and Low Carbon Heat

Event Write-up

On 14th July 2020, Carbon Connect held an online roundtable to discuss public engagement in the low carbon heat transition. The event was sponsored by Northern Gas Networks and it was one of a series of roundtable discussions held as follow-up events on Policy Connect's Future Gas Series reports. This document was produced as a post-event write-up by Policy Connect. While it was informed by the roundtable discussion, it does not necessarily represent the views of all those in attendance.

The session investigated how to engage the public in the transition to low carbon heat.

Key points:

- Low public awareness and engagement is one of the major barriers to the deployment of low carbon heat.
- While other transformations, such as coal phase out from the grid, can happen with little or no engagement from consumers, the public needs to play an active part in the low carbon heat transition which is likely to bring disruption to people's lives during its roll-out.
- Thus, more investment is needed in public awareness campaigns, as well as in research that seeks to understand customer perceptions of low carbon heat. The upcoming Heat and Buildings Strategy needs to dedicate sufficient attention to public engagement and awareness raising.
- Similar to other aspects of the low carbon heat transition, a central coordinating body is needed to ensure that public engagement happens in a streamlined approach, communicating harmonised messages to consumers.
- Based on lessons learnt from previous large-scale transformations, low carbon heating options need to be made more visible and more 'exciting' for customers, using the right framing.
- People have to be given a voice in decision-making about the low carbon heat transition. Moreover, it is important to enable consumers through free and impartial advice to make an informed choice from the range of options available to them.

The challenge ahead of us

As it was highlighted by the Committee on Climate Change in a number of reports, decarbonising heating plays a vital role in meeting the 2050 target. Heating is responsible for about one third of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions¹ and currently only about 4.5% of heating systems are low carbon².

One of the major barriers to the low carbon heat transition is low public awareness of and engagement with heating in general, as well as its carbon implications³. While the general public has become more

¹ BEIS. 2018. Clean Growth - Transforming Heating. Overview of Current Evidence

² The Committee on Climate Change. 2019. Progress Report

³ This has been highlighted by a number of studies over recent years. As the 'Understanding Net Zero: A Consumer Perspective' report by Energy Systems Catapult found (2020), only 49% of respondents identified gas boilers as a contributor to climate change and only 20% of respondents would consider switching to low carbon heating³.

Furthermore, polling commissioned for the Uncomfortable Home Truths report by Policy Connect (2019) showed that only 14% of respondents placed heating decarbonisation as a top priority to tackle climate change, putting it below

engaged with the issue of climate change, there is not much evidence that this has spilled into the area of heat⁴.

Make consumers active participants in the low carbon heat transition

While other transformations, such as phasing out coal from the grid, can happen with no or little consumer engagement, **the low carbon heat transition needs the active participation of consumers in the process.** Therefore, **public engagement and awareness raising campaigns are crucial to enable the low carbon heat transition.**

Public engagement needs to be a vital part of the upcoming Heat and Building Strategy

Raising public awareness and engagement need to be vital aspects of the upcoming Heat and Buildings Strategy in order to help the public understand what the low carbon heat transition involves and why it is important.

Set up a central coordinating body for the low carbon heat transition

Similar to other aspects of the low carbon heat transition, **a central coordinating body is needed to ensure that public engagement happens in a streamlined approach, communicating harmonised messages to consumers.**

Make heating visible and ‘exciting’ to engage with

The low public awareness of heating is partly caused by the fact that heat is mostly invisible to consumers and it is generally seen as ‘boring’. Learning from previous large-scale transformations, such as the adoption of natural gas heating or cars, **when significant sums of money were spend on making consumers enthusiastic about the change happening, it is important to invest in making low carbon heating options more visible and more ‘exciting’ for customers.**

Therefore, **heat – which is currently mostly absent from everyday conversations on climate change – needs to be brought at the forefront.** More innovative and creative methods have to be used to add ‘sparkle’ and encourage the public to engage with heat. The heatseekers quest where members of the public can discover how heat is generated and how it escapes through thermal imaging cameras, and the UKERC-funded Zero Carbon City game of Possible were highlighted as examples.

Choose the right framing

When raising the public awareness of heating, it is really important to **choose the right framing.** In most cases, people renovate their homes to improve comfort, rather than reduce costs. Thus, framing the installation of low carbon heating systems/energy retrofits purely as an economic case for households is not the most effective way of framing heat decarbonisation to the public, especially as low carbon heat systems are usually more expensive than their conventional counterparts. Learning from the failure of previous schemes, such as the Green Deal, can provide important lessons in this respect.

other areas, such as greener transport, renewable electricity or waste reduction. In a similar vein, only 5% of MPs taking part in the poll included natural gas boilers in their top three sources of emissions to tackle³.

⁴ As Citizens Advice’s survey demonstrated in 2019, while 82% of respondents were supportive of the net zero, only over a third (38%) of them were aware that this requires changes to household heating.

Breaking out of silo thinking and emphasising the co-benefits low carbon heating systems and energy efficiency retrofits can bring also plays a really important role in framing heat decarbonisation projects.

For instance, while the **community aspect** of community-owned solar farms or wind farms is often emphasised which helps to engage consumers in these projects, this is rarely replicated for heat projects, despite the fact that heating systems (the gas grid, district heating networks) connect people and communities with each other. Aiming to reverse this trends, the Powering Parks initiative was highlighted which investigates the installation of heat pumps in parks to provide heat to nearby buildings, bringing several co-benefits to the community⁵.

Moreover, as social science research carried out as part of H21 project found, highlighting personal responsibility, the responsibility to neighbours, family and future generations were important aspects that could engage people in discussions on low carbon heat⁶.

Investment in research and public awareness campaigns

Understanding customer perceptions is a very important aspect of the low carbon heat transition.

Therefore, **more social science research is needed to understand consumer perceptions and these research results are then need to be used to design communication and public awareness campaigns.**

Give people a voice in making decisions on low carbon heating

Besides engaging the public in the low carbon heat transition, it is also important to **give consumers a voice in the decisions that are being made nationally, locally, as well as at the level of households.** Citizen assemblies have an important role in engaging the public in the low carbon heat transition and giving them voice in decision-making in this area, with the Climate Assembly being a notable example in this area.

Enable consumers to make an informed choice from the range of options available to them

It is important that rather than trying to sell people different ‘ideologies’, customers are provided with impartial information about the low carbon options available to them based on which they can make their own choices about what is best for them. Therefore, we need a whole systems approach, rather than just a focus on specific decarbonisation pathways. The 2050 calculator of DECC, although designed for the previous 80% 2050 reduction target, was highlighted as a public engagement tool that enables the public to engage with the energy systems of the future and helps them think about low carbon choices that are available.

Trust

Trust is a crucial ingredient of the low carbon heat transition. Consumers will not start decarbonising their heating systems if they do not trust all the actors involved in the low carbon heat transition, including installers, engineers and suppliers. Building trust is important in both ways, as the government and industry also need to trust consumers in this process.

Safety is an important part of the discussions on trust. While the H21 social science research project found that customers generally trusted that if hydrogen was introduced in the gas grid, it would be properly tested and proven safe to do so⁷, it is still important to highlight the need for appropriate regulation and standards

⁵ <https://www.wearepossible.org/powering-parks>

⁶ Fylan, F., Fletcher, M. and Christmas, S. 2020. H21: Public perceptions of converting the gas network to hydrogen. Social Sciences Study.

⁷ Ibid.

as we progress on all areas of the low carbon heat transition to maintain trust. To ensure high public acceptance, new heating systems need to be as safe as or even safer than current heating systems.

Provide impartial advice and support

Closely related to the question of trust is the need **for impartial, localised, visible and free advice for consumers**. The public needs to have access to advice from trusted sources to give them the confidence to engage in the low carbon transition and enable them to make informed choices from the range of options available to them.

Local Area Energy Planning is needed

Besides the need for a national strategy for heat decarbonisation, it is important to recognise that **different areas with different characteristics will need different low carbon heating solutions**. For instance, while a combination of hybrid and air-source and ground-source heat pumps, as well as pellet boilers can suit off grid areas, these would not necessarily offer a solution in densely populated urban areas where district heating or hydrogen conversion might suit local needs better.

The H21 social sciences research project found that the cost of changing appliances was a consumer concern related to the low carbon heat transition. This highlights that consumers need timely communication and sufficient notice (as well as government subsidies) to be able to prepare for changing their appliances⁸. **In order to enable people to plan and think about their future heating systems, it is important to provide them with the information regarding which low carbon heating solutions are planned in their local area.**

Therefore, it is important to start local energy planning and develop area plans which can then be used to raise awareness among people about the specific low carbon heating scenarios they need to prepare for.

Ensure that the transition happens in a fair way, improving heating for all

The H21 social sciences research project found that while the public is generally not concerned about the increase in bills heat decarbonisation brings for them, they were concerned about other people who might struggle with these increases. Therefore, to keep the public engaged in the low carbon heat transition, it is important to ensure that the transition is carried out in fair and equitable way, eradicating fuel poverty.

Use messages that are easy to understand and free of jargon

While it is important not to oversimplify messages in which the information gets distorted, we need to get rid of jargon and technical acronyms upon communicating with consumers about the low carbon heat transition and use messages that are easy to understand.

Mandate low regret options early

Previous transitions, such as the roll-out of condensing boilers, have shown that the regulatory introduction of low regret options is well accepted by the public if households are supported appropriately in the process and the right public engagement approach is used.

⁸ Ibid.

Heat as a service

Currently, people tend to own part of the equipment they use for heating (i.e. boilers) and they pay for gas/electricity for heat. As many people are satisfied with their boilers, the idea of having those systems 'ripped off' and replaced by low carbon alternatives can be one of the obstacles to the low carbon heat transition. While it is still being trialled, the concept of heat as a service was brought up as a potential model that can help facilitate the low carbon heat transition. Heat as a service re-imagines the current business model, moving to a system in which customers pay for an outcome (having a warm home), rather than the electricity/gas used.

For instance, the Living Lab project of Energy Systems Catapult found that participants paying for heat as a service are more open to low carbon heating solutions, since they knew that for a predictable price they could get the same level of comfort as they would with their gas boiler⁹. (In the scheme, consumers could buy 'Heat Plans', which meant that instead of kilowatt hours, they could buy 'warm hours', and the heating system, as well as its service and maintenance was also inclusive in the price).

While heat as a service will not, in itself, drive the low carbon heat transition, it has a potential to create an environment in which people become more open to low carbon heating. Therefore, it is important to do further trials and research about this concept.

⁹ <https://es.catapult.org.uk/reports/using-the-living-lab-to-sell-consumer-centric-heat-services-that-encourage-adoption-of-low-carbon-heating/>