



Can we turn up the heat on decarbonisation in the cost of living crisis?

The cost of not listening series

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The current gas crisis is directly affecting the escalating cost of living for the UK public.

With latest 'price cap' changes, [Cornwall Insight predict](#) an average household energy bill of over £4000 from January 2023. This winter, UK households [will be spending more of their money on energy and fuel](#) than at any other time in the past half century. By January 2023 over half of households in the UK (15 million) [will be in fuel poverty](#) – spending over 10 per cent of net income on fuel.

Government support for bill-payers now seems wholly inadequate, in the face of the most disadvantaged being neither able to heat or eat. As the politics of the Conservative leadership contest plays out, we also see consumer distrust in the energy system after a legacy of bust companies and energy producers reporting record profits.

The cost of living and consumer trust pose huge challenges and opportunities on the path to Net Zero, in what needs to be a 'decisive decade' for acting on climate change.

What we're seeing now

Decarbonising home heat is now widely seen as one of the biggest Net Zero challenges to make progress on. With 85% of us using natural gas boilers in the UK and many of us living in some of the draughtiest homes in Europe, the need for change is considerable.

Clearly this poses both challenges and opportunities for those living in fuel poverty and struggling to pay energy bills – and we expect a real risk to net zero if consumer concerns around cost and trust aren't engaged with and addressed.

In our most recent research and engagement work, while an ever-present issue, we've seen public concern over cost escalate over the first half of 2022. We are seeing a clear tension between people's continued desire to act on climate change, and their ability to pay for changes to their homes and the way they live their lives.

When engaging on decarbonising domestic heat, a citizen panel of energy network customers told us that they were worried their ability to make an environmentally friendly decision would be driven primarily by cost, both in terms of upfront installation and on-going bills and maintenance.

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We also saw scepticism around new technologies or the fear that these become obsolete, linked to previous scandals such as diesel emissions. This directly played into hesitancy to convert to low-carbon technology until these were more tried and tested, and people wanting to avoid doing one thing then paying to change again a few years later.

When engaging with housing association residents about sustainable homes we saw a desire to get on with changes to make homes warm and of a decent standard. Participants saw insulation and improved glazing as a 'no-brainer'.

But as those who engage regularly with tenants and leaseholders will know, conversations around who pays for improvement works and how disruption is managed, are always challenging.



Across our work, we see a call for increased public engagement. People want independent, local advice they can trust. This resonates with the 'one-stop-shop' approach the Energy Savings Trust and others advocate for.

People want local stakeholders to join up on to deliver decarbonisation and retrofit: housing associations to work with local authorities, and energy networks to work across the private and public sector, but particularly with tradesmen on the frontline of consumer interaction. This chimes with [BEIS public attitude data](#), showing that the public would most trust a tradesperson to provide advice about which heating system to install.

What can we do?

We believe that to act on climate change and deliver net zero, the evidence base for decisions must include the voices of citizens. More specifically, for a just transition, we must involve people with diverse lived experiences, including those who are typically underrepresented or experiencing vulnerability – financial or otherwise.

Our three recommendations for organisations engaging on energy, climate and sustainability issues – and more specifically around cost and trust are:

Inclusive & empowering methodologies

Organisations working on these issues and particularly those committing to a just transition, must be more proactive at involving people with diverse lived experiences in decision-making. In this context, more than ever this should include people with who are experiencing financial vulnerability.

As a minimum, practitioners should design engagement which empowers marginalised and underrepresented audiences to participate.

Going further, organisations should look to co-design inclusive engagement, working with people with people who may face barriers to participation, or bring lived experience of inequality to ensure events, methods and materials are accessible.

We recommend questioning whether convening broadly representative audiences, will give you the insight to make decisions that truly ensure no one is left behind in the net zero transition.



Deliberative engagement

We regularly recommend deliberative methods for engaging with the public on complex and future-oriented issues like net zero and climate action.

Deliberative engagement allows time and space for participants to learn about the issue and hear from and question experts.

It lets participants hear other perspectives and immerse themselves in activities to explore different angles over several sessions. Importantly on these issues, it helps go beyond top of mind responses, providing rich insight into underlying values and beliefs.

We know how impactful it is for clients who witness how deliberative techniques can support participants to think as citizens, not just individuals when considering the societal issues inherent in climate action and decarbonisation.

Equally we hear clients recognise the vested and commercial interests within the energy system and reflect on how the findings from deliberative engagement can help counter these.

At Traverse, in the context of the gas crisis, we're calling for a new national public dialogue on home energy emissions reduction, with associated media to help raise UK-wide engagement on the issue and stronger buy-in from decision-makers to act on the findings.

We've seen UKRI and NERC seeking to try out a more equitable approach to public dialogue, with participants involved in the design, and think this would work well to challenge traditional research power dynamics.

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Stakeholders acting and engaging collaboratively in shared localities

When it comes to net zero ready homes, joined up engagement will be vital.

Anyone who has ever worked in utility customer engagement will have heard 'why can't they co-ordinate roadworks, rather than digging up the road 3 times...'.

Well, you can well imagine that the public will have even less patience with multiple disruptions in their own homes and hearing 3 different ways to do it.

Taking a 'whole-house' joined up approach across utilities, local government and wider net zero stakeholders, to engaging local residents would be powerful.

It would help ensure a holistic and balanced approach to engagement, particularly where sensitive issues of cost are being discussed, where industry has divergent views on future scenarios, or trust is low.

Collaborating across sectors on engagement could also be a valuable base from which stakeholders can agree how to respond and act on findings. We recently heard a local government client reflecting on how their Citizen Assembly findings,

had kept stakeholders with different priorities on the same page when preparing their action plan.

Similarly, an energy system client spoke to how deliberative engagement on future energy strategy, had spurred them to start joining up with other stakeholders to engage with the public, even in areas they were not proposing infrastructure.

So, at a time when people feel like they're losing agency due to cost or not knowing what advice to follow about home energy, we're encouraging you to challenge your organisations to increase engagement, and to do so in more inclusive, meaningful and joined up ways.

Get in touch

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