A SHAPE evidence roundtable on understanding publics and net zero

Summary note

October 2024

The British Academy

Contents

This summary note draws together the main points discussed during a roundtable that took place in person at the British Academy on 16 October 2024. The discussion was held under the Chatham House rule and its contents do not necessarily reflect the views of any individual participant or of the British Academy or its Fellows.

If you have comments or reflections on it, please email the Academy's public policy team (policy@thebritishacademy.ac.uk) – we would be very interested in to hear from you.

Introduction

The UK's legally binding target to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050 presents technological, social, economic, and political challenges for government and society more broadly. The most recent Climate Change Committee (CCC) progress report highlights some examples of good progress – particularly in low-carbon technologies such as wind power and electric cars. However, the CCC emphasised that it is 'not enough' and 'urgent action is needed to get on track for the UK's 2030 target'. While many of the CCC's priority recommendations are technical or technological in nature, at least four directly relate to how government (the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero in particular) interacts with publics.

Understanding the role of publics in decarbonisation is an area where SHAPE (Social science, Humanities and Arts for People, Economy & environment) disciplines bring experience and insight from decades of research. As the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences, the British Academy is the ideal setting to explore the evidence and consider carefully how it can be applied in practice on these questions.

On 16 October 2024, a group of researchers and officials (from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Cabinet Office), gathered at the British Academy to explore some of the latest SHAPE research in this space and discuss its implications.

The challenge

The new government's missions framed the discussion. In particular: 'Make Britain a clean energy superpower to cut bills, create jobs and deliver security with cheaper, zero-carbon electricity by 2030, accelerating to net zero'. This also directly supports the economic growth mission. Officials highlighted that the clean energy superpower mission has two pillars: decarbonising the energy system and accelerating to net zero. The latter is where SHAPE evidence is most needed, although the implications of the discussion touched on both pillars.

There is now a sense that we are in what has been described as a 'decisive decade' for climate action, so rising to the challenge is both urgent and complex. All participants to the discussion shared the clear understanding that people are central to it and that fairness and equity are important. Further evidence on several fronts is needed: how can we accelerate; how can we make sure people are treated fairly and equitably; how can we use the evidence of what works to inform policy?

The roundtable invited researchers with deep expertise in a range of disciplines who work on understanding publics around environmental issues to give short provocations. It then moved into a discussion of four questions:

1. What does our understanding of publics suggest are the most effective approaches to public engagement?
2. How (and why) collaboration and partnership (both between levels and scales of government and with other organisations and businesses) can be used most effectively to engage publics?

3. What is on the horizon? What does our current understanding of publics tell us about the likelihood of what the IPCC terms 'deep, rapid and sustained' decarbonization by 2030?
4. How can conflicts that may arise be avoided, mitigated or resolved?

This summary note brings together the discussion under five headings, applied ex-post for the purpose of structuring this summary.

1: Deepen understanding of the extent and conditional nature of public support for net zero

1.1   There is clear evidence of public support for a more sustainable future; it is the *conditionality* that matters

Several researchers present emphasised the clear evidence of public support for a more sustainable future. This challenges the narrative of 'taking people with us' with an alternative: 'converting latent support'. This requires an understanding of the nature of the support, and trust in the processes taking place within government.

While the vast majority of people are supportive, this support is conditional. Policymakers need to better understand and respond to that conditionality, rather than reacting to the vocal fringes. Every policy is an opportunity to build this mandate and 'convert latent support' and policy should be seen as a communication tool for this purpose (see also Section 2 below).

Housing was given as an example, noting that the evidence is clear that the impacts of climate change will cause disruption for everyone. But where people get into good quality, sustainable homes, they usually love living in them. Evidence was shared from the ACCESS Net Zero Task Force where reframing debates around social or collective harms can be effective: reducing smoking, where the framing shifted to passive smoking, a collective harm; or school streets, where the framing is focused on children's health and wellbeing.

1.2   Starting points for understanding the conditions

Across the discussion, a range of points highlighted some of the well-evidenced types of factors that could help to provide a better understanding of the conditionality driving support for a more sustainable future. This includes:

- Evidence from CAST showing that the strongest predictor of public support is **perceived fairness**.

- Individuals are very open to trade-offs, but they **like to be in the driving seat**: co-producing solutions, having agency and freedom to choose (even small choices).

- A crucial and challenging element of the picture is **trust in government**. Levels of distrust are, therefore, a significant concern. Connected to trust is **transparency and leadership**, which are also regularly highlighted (see this briefing from the Climate Citizens Research Group or this research paper for example)

- **Avoid shortcuts, polarising categories and emphasising divisions** such as 'blockers' and 'nimbys'.

- **People act based on what fits with their values** - don't expect people to do things for climate reasons, but don't hide the climate message. This connects with evidence around co-benefits.

- The **direction of travel** of policies and their future implications matter to people.

Researchers participating in this discussion are working with modellers to build social and qualitative research into energy model designs (this Energy Demand Research Centre blog describes the approach). This is transdisciplinary work between economists and social researchers that is helping to improve the assumptions underpinning these models, but it needs to be further scaled up.

Seeing the issues from other perspectives, it can also come down to imagination – we need to be able to imagine multiple roles and ways of thinking about people that can unlock new ideas. There needs to be more open and honest conversations on net zero futures and more space for difficult conversations, including about trade-offs.

1.3   Place can help to understand the conditionality of public support and how to respond

Communities that have already been deeply impacted by the transition include those linked to industrial clusters such as Grangemouth, Milford Haven and Ellesmere Port. Research conducted in these places by the University of Exeter, funded under the IDRIC programme, has found that a 'techno-centric' framing of an ideal future was in competition with community concerns about the welfare of their children, access to services and related issues. This and other evidence highlight that perceptions of justice can vary between places. It also reminds us that everyone wears different hats – citizens, parents, employees, etc. A place-sensitive perspective, therefore, needs to account for and model the impacts of the transition on families, children and communities.

Sensitivity to place and place-based approaches can also draw out the jointly told stories and histories that can and should inform policy interventions. It can help make big narratives meaningful to people. The example of the Risky Cities project and a specific project ('Flood-lights') in Kingston-upon-Hull was given, for which a mix-methods evaluation demonstrated a clear impact. This illustrates how people's connection to place is deep-seated, and multi-layered, and how arts and humanities methods can create space for difficult discussions that go beyond a simplistic 'deficit-model' of communicating. The example also links to another strand of the discussion on engagement methods, further emphasising the importance of place in engagement – particularly for groups that are less commonly engaged in these issues.

1.4   Cultural institutions play a soft power role

Museums were highlighted as having a soft-power role in engagement, for example, the Design Museum's free public display on low carbon housebuilding and concrete. This type of institution also helps give insights into people's desires, while putting aside day-to-day concerns – for example, the engagement with the displays shows people's interest in green homes.

1.5   Equity, fairness and justice: thinking about the 'lightning rods'

Evidence is showing that currently net zero policies are seen as inequitable. This may be a combination of real affordability issues around upgrading home heating or purchasing new vehicles, and politicised reporting in parts of the media. The nuances in the discussion brought out some important considerations that may be political 'lightning rods'. It was noted that fairness is something everyone wants but people understand it in different ways – only thinking about ability to pay can obscure these nuances. To illustrate this, one contributor highlighted that energy policy has been historically bad at addressing people on the margins of fuel poverty – the so-called 'squeezed middle', 'hard-working families' or people 'just-about-managing'. These groups may be expected to choose between installing a heat pump or going on holiday. While not immediately vulnerable, they are at risk of losing out and becoming vulnerable – emphasising that precarity is dynamic. As such these groups can be more politically influential. This layers on top of existing and new, emerging vulnerabilities, including health inequalities as explored in the Institute for Community Studies report, Our Journey to Net Zero.   More evidence is needed to understand the impacts and intersecting issues facing already marginalised communities on net zero.

It was not possible in the time available to delve further into these issues and another discussion may be needed that goes into more depth on concepts and associated evidence on different understandings of fairness (including procedural fairness), justice (including distributional, procedural and recognition justice) and equity (further resources available at ClimateJust). In practice, these factors are playing out in considerations about community benefit schemes which were mentioned in brief but would require more time to explore in full.

1.6   Local authorities have an important role in delivering rapid change

Concerns were shared among participants that local authorities, while playing a crucial role on these issues, whether from a place- or people-perspective, don't have the capacity to engage with the social side of net zero.

2: Do what we know works, informed by a more nuanced understanding of 'engagement' and a wider range of methods to communicate with publics

2.1   A more nuanced understanding: how you frame the problem dictates the
           solution

There was a strong consensus among the participants in the discussion against an approach to government communications that explicitly or implicitly attempts to *correct* a knowledge deficit among publics. There was also some challenge to the idea that the public aren't very engaged, so *engaging* them is the solution. Reframing the problem could start with understanding that publics are highly diverse, with distinct values and are already engaged with climate change and net zero in many ways – even if unknowingly (for further detail see: Chilvers, J., Bellamy, R., Pallett, H. & Hargreaves, T. (2021) A systemic approach to mapping participation with low-carbon energy transitions. Nature Energy 6(3): 250–259). This opens up other possible solutions, including that government doesn't have to take responsibility for all the engagement, but it does need to take a lead in setting agendas, coordinating across the system and taking forward decisions that account for the outcomes of engagement activity.

2.2 Using galvanising issues to respond to contestation and understand varying engagement

Historical examples drawing from the ACCESS Task Force on Net Zero highlight the inevitable presence of contestation and controversy as part of transition processes. Such examples highlight that contestation should not just be seen as an obstacle but will point to valid concerns and interests. Enabling honest discussions of contested issues may help anticipate strong responses to these ('backlash'). Evidence cited in the roundtable drawing on a series of case studies highlighted the importance of 'galvanising issues' – focal issues that bring people together despite their different interests. Good examples mentioned were retro-fitting and traffic. Such issues could then provide a means to respond to or manage contestation.

A connected strand of the discussion highlighted evidence from deliberative work that links to people's understanding of specific risks. People are responding more to risks that are more immediately visible like rain and heatwaves. People are not actively contemplating what kind of climate futures we are facing, but the deliberative work shows that when you confront them with these futures, they want to see more from government (for example: Social Visions for a Low Carbon Future, CAST).

2.3 A systems approach to public engagement, by mapping, integrating and evaluating disparate activity

A systems approach to public engagement can improve net zero engagement and decision making. The UKERC Public Engagement Observatory is mapping diverse public engagements across systems and exploring how these new forms of evidence could make a difference through collaborative experiments with partners (including government, business and civil society). For example, they are working with the Climate Change Committee, water companies and the UK and Dutch governments. Such approaches can offer comprehensive evidence on public engagement and can help to detect emerging issues, exclusions and make better use of citizen-led action.

This also points to the need to build a more coordinated, joined-up and systems approach for public engagement. This includes drawing on a wider range of methods including digital and other mapping tools to build national datasets of already existing public engagements, overcoming silos between engagement approaches in different disciplines and different parts of government, and introducing more systemic governance, resourcing and evaluation of engagement.

2.4 There is room for much better communication on net zero

The discussion brought out a role for government communications, while clearly stressing that this role is not public engagement. Communication isn't just about public campaigns - every policy is an opportunity to communicate. One example cited was the recent announcement on carbon capture and storage: it had no message on how it contributes to net zero.

Researchers highlighted that it would not be hard to develop a socially intelligent set of messages that government can use and apply widely across its channels. This can play out on several levels: through community-based communication; through communication from leaders, along the lines demonstrated during the Covid pandemic; and through personal communication from trusted figures, as demonstrated by GPs on Covid vaccines.

In terms of some of the more difficult challenges relating to net zero, there was some discussion of how to communicate, with concern expressed that people tend to see through a uniformly positive message, but equally, that governments don't like to tell people bad news.

A proposal to connect SHAPE researchers and government communications teams (including digital teams) was discussed as a means to try and bring social intelligence into these processes.

2.5   Further and continued innovation in public engagement

There is evidence that participation is seen as a privilege and that not participating can result in feelings of guilt. There may be groups that are more ready and able to participate for a range of reasons and equally, those who choose not to participate. Meanwhile, whether we should do public engagement is itself contested by those who argue that we should 'just get on with it' regardless of public perceptions. However, there is evidence from CAST that engaging people can accelerate change, including in hard to decarbonise areas of demand. This can be done by unlocking people power and exploring the multiple roles that people have to reduce their own emissions and affect wider systems change.

As discussed in section 1, there is strong public support, but it is conditional – fairness and effectiveness go hand-in-hand and there is more support where people retain some levels of freedom, where there are co-benefits and where barriers to action are removed. With this in mind, government can also acknowledge that there may be scope to reverse the polarity of engagement, that is to say, placing more emphasis on government's role and creating agency and efficacy for individuals.

There is a distinction to be made between public engagement at the point of delivery, and public engagement at the point of decision-making. In terms of the latter, citizens assemblies and other deliberative methods were discussed and were highlighted as not accessible enough, and often not actually feeding into decisions. People have an appetite to participate in decisions, but that requires trust, follow-through and an approach that has a real mandate to use the insights arising and for further policy co-production.   An example of a space where this might be used is social housing retrofit, where UKERC evidence was cited as to the importance and value of involving people in decisions, even on very small aspects of the approach.

Finally, there was a call for more 'anticipatory' public engagement and foresight approaches (which might include talking to publics about what might become controversial), as well as using the above-mentioned mapping methods to better detect and understand emerging public controversies.

3: Take upstream actions - a people-centred, systems approach and designing-in solutions

3.1   Upstream actions: make low carbon the easy and cheap default

Climate policy needs to consider how inequalities affect people's abilities to live sustainably. Evidence shows that 'downstream' tools (getting people to do more individually) have weak effects and exacerbate inequalities. Upstream actions (such as economic and regulatory measures, removing barriers and clear leadership) which make low-carbon the easy and cheap default are much more effective.

There was agreement around the table that this is a compelling argument, that also speaks to the need for government to take a longer-term, people-centred view on these issues. Planning and new housing regulations were given as specific examples where the time-horizon needs to be stretched out to 5-10 years.

3.2   The importance of the 'mid-level' in governance

Case study evidence discussed at the roundtable highlighted the importance of governance as a means to focus on individual change and behaviour. The 'mid-level' – local authorities, schools, third sector organisations, etc – is a valuable link between publics and government that needs to be more thoroughly built into governance processes in support of a people-centred, systems approach. Among others, the ACCESS Network Net Zero Taskforce has highlighted this.

3.3   The vital role of design

A crucial 'upstream' opportunity for solutions is at the design stage. Key decisions are made at the point of design on materials, longevity, re-use, recycling and end of life. However, there is a lack of agency among many designers. A stronger call to change course is needed so designers can stop working at the 'symptoms' level and shift to the 'systems' or 'narrative' level. This would allow designing in of solutions.

3.4   A systems approach

Across the discussion the importance of a systems approach was emphasised. In particular, there was a call for improved mapping of public engagement and social intelligence activities and insights (see for example, Chilvers, J. & Kearnes, M. (eds.) (2016) Remaking Participation: Science, Environment and Emergent Publics. Routledge). The discussion also circled around the relationships between publics, policy and science (understood to include all forms of structured knowledge – so including SHAPE). All aspects of the discussion were inter-related and linkages were emphasised throughout. SHAPE disciplines can help understand this system, but further work is still needed to articulate the 'coherent, simple theory of change' that will allow a scaled-up response. The challenge for government and for the SHAPE research community, therefore, is to help build such a model to understand this system and integrate this model into decision-making.

4: Revisit institutional structures for drawing on SHAPE evidence at the right time

4.1   Better links between SHAPE and policy: institutionalising dialogue

A clear call from multiple contributors (which mirrored conclusions set out by the ACCESS Network Net Zero Taskforce) was made for a more institutional approach to drawing in SHAPE evidence, possibly by increasing the number of SHAPE researchers on departmental advisory councils or revisiting a model like the joint DECC/Defra social science panel. It was noted that the latter continues (as the Social Science Expert Group) but only as a subgroup of Defra's Science Advisory Council. Defra's Social Science Expert Group published a valuable review of public engagement in 2022. Sharing expertise (potentially with other departments that are involved in delivering net zero such as MHCLG, DCMS and DfT) would strengthen links between social science, humanities and arts research as well as between research and policy.

4.2   Overcoming fragmentation within the research community

Alongside a call for a more structured approach, the discussion highlighted a need to continue working across disciplinary and geographic barriers in the SHAPE research community. The British Academy and other conveners and funders (e.g. ACCESS) are part of efforts to overcome these barriers but more can and should be done.

4.3   Specific proposals for innovative structures that could open up new opportunities

- **More scope to consider radical approaches within government:** A proposal for a unit empowered to think outside the box and explore radical ideas posed an important challenge to respond seriously to the urgency of the issue and the need to accelerate to net zero by creating space for a unit within government empowered to explore more radical approaches informed by SHAPE evidence. A specifically empowered unit would also have more scope to bring this evidence to bear much earlier in policy processes.

- **A permanent citizen's panel in the cabinet office and/or standing citizens assemblies:** A proposal was made for a permanent citizen's panel which can act as a citizen sounding board (a more detailed discussion of this can be found in this Climate Citizens Research Group report). This is not a single solution to all the issues being raised – issues of representation were discussed – but would constitute a strong signal that government is talking to people. Live examples from Milan and Brussels were referred to. A further proposal for standing citizens assemblies was made. It was noted in the discussion that to fit with wider points about a systems approach, this would need to be coupled with other innovative structures in the form of observatories or similar entities that develop national mapping datasets of existing public engagement and go beyond evidence captured by existing social research in government.

- **Building governance structures where participation is embedded:** Referring in particular to existing institutions – GP surgeries, schools, etc – and how governance structures can include these trusted middle actors (recognising that government isn't always the best voice) to bring about rapid progress. While still acknowledging the leadership role for government and the importance of consistent communication.

- **A secondment system between local and central government:** Secondments were highlighted as a simple tool to give central government a better understanding of publics by bringing in local government officials on secondments.

5: Continue actively seeking SHAPE insights on connected and cross-cutting issues

5.1   Links and connections: across missions and between disciplines

The discussion highlighted the interlinkage between the issues raised around understanding publics on net zero, and the government's other missions and priorities. There are also important connections between disciplines and types of knowledge, including between physical sciences, technology, arts, humanities and social sciences. The key point highlighted here was that we need to gather expertise and take action in an integrated way so as to constructively challenge conventional wisdom inside government.

This emphasises that the problems discussed in this roundtable are systems problems – there is never going to be a one-size fits all solution and even a 'stratified' approach (*putting*

people in boxes) – will not be sufficient. The value of working across disciplines was re-emphasised and will be important to continue and take further.

5.2   Trust is central and cross-cutting, highlighting a wider set of issues

Some of the challenges highlighted in this discussion – for example, trust in government – go beyond this single area and cut across all the government's five missions. This is an ongoing challenge and there is still work to do in getting the governance on all five missions right.

Other avenues the discussion touched on but could not explore in depth link to related questions of sustainability and policymaking more generally. The British Academy has convened other groups to consider public trust in science-for-policymaking with a range of connected conclusions which are relevant to these issues as published in a recent report.

Participating SHAPE researchers (and provocations)

Each of the participants gave a short provocation (a three-minute introduction pointing to relevant evidence and recommendations). Finalised versions of these are linked below:

Professor Andy Jordan FBA (co-Chair)	Professor of Environmental Sciences, University of East Anglia	
Professor Karen Bickerstaff	Professor in Human Geography, University of Exeter	Provocation (download)
Tania Carregha	Senior Research Manager, Institute for Community Studies	
Professor Jason Chilvers	Co-Director, UK Energy Research Centre	Provocation (download)
Professor Patrick Devine-Wright	Director, ACCESS - Advancing Capacity for Climate and Environment Social Science	Provocation (download)
Professor Irene Lorenzoni	Professor of Society and Environmental Change, University of East Anglia	Provocation (download)
Professor Briony McDonagh	Interim Director of the Energy and Environment Institute & Professor of Environmental Humanities, University of Hull	Provocation (download)
Justin McGuirk	Director, Future Observatory	Provocation (download)
Emily Morrison	Director of Sustainability and Just Transition, Young Foundation	
Professor Nick Pidgeon FBA	Professor of Environmental Psychology, University of Cardiff	Provocation (download)
Professor Lorraine Whitmarsh	Director, CAST - Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations	Provocation (download)
Professor Rebecca Willis	Professor in Energy and Climate Governance, University of Lancaster	Provocation (download)