

RSE Energy Inquiry Roundtable on Social and Community Aspects of Energy

The Royal Society of Edinburgh, 25 July 2018

Introduction

As part of the evidence gathering process for the Royal Society of Edinburgh's (RSE) major inquiry into *Scotland's Energy Future*, the Society convened a roundtable discussion to gather views on social and community aspects of energy. The discussion included representatives from a number of third sector organisations involved in this area and was held under the Chatham House Rule.

The participants were prompted with 3 key questions that were published as part of the Call for Evidence:

- What account should be taken of the environmental and social impacts on those living elsewhere in the world, of the international energy supply chains on which we may choose to rely?
- What actions can be taken, and by whom, to ensure that energy is accessible to all at an affordable cost for those on low incomes; and that any changes in energy provisions and associated tariffs are understandable and accessible?
- What are the particular advantages enjoyed, and challenges faced, regarding energy; and what lessons can be learned on a national scale from community energy schemes undertaken by:
 - Rural and remote communities?
 - Urban communities?

The text below provides a distillation of the key themes that came out of the meeting and does not necessarily reflect the position of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

Climate Justice

There is broad support for the principle of climate justice. Historically, Scotland has benefitted from and used more carbon than the vast majority of nations. There are many beneficial aspects of moving toward renewable energy, including reducing CO₂ emissions. It must be acknowledged, however, that certain communities are highly reliant on fossil fuels and will need assistance in this transition.

The international supply chain means more than just having access to companies that produce and install renewable technologies. We may rely on countries for these technologies with poor human rights records or labour protection regulations.

Communication

Energy policy cannot exclusively be about supply and demand. There also needs to be a drive to inform the public about related issues. We need to facilitate discussion with the public about their moral responsibilities and how their lifestyle may need to change to meet climate targets. The government undoubtedly has a role to play in this and has had some success in such public information campaigns in the past, for example in relation to drink driving.

The Scottish Government does put a lot of money into energy efficiency, but this investment requires better messaging alongside it. The majority of the public are more concerned about the standard of living for their families than an altruistic notion of climate justice. Self-interest can be used in messaging to appeal to people.

Messaging needs to be engaging and explain how changes will improve people's lives. Various initiatives and measures have been communicated to the public individually, but there also needs to be a push to help the public understand how improvements can be made collectively.

Messaging also needs to address concerns. Following Grenfell the public are understandably wary about cladding on buildings. These concerns need to be addressed and the benefits explained.

Introduction of New Technologies

The mass introduction of electric vehicles (EV) appears inevitable and this will require specific messaging for the public. Lessons should be learned from the botched information programme that accompanied the roll out of smart metres; where introduction was haphazard and unachievable targets were promoted.

Smart metres were a big deal in the industry, but introduction was piecemeal without a great enough proportion of the public being made aware. The onus should be placed on the supplier to inform, rather than the individual to act.

Electric vehicles and other mandated programmes are created from good intention, but often end up with the poorest in society getting the worst deal. Costs often fall disproportionately on the poor. Some people in fuel poverty are likely to never even own an EV. The transition to a low carbon society needs to be practical and just. Infrastructure changes will be extensive and people must be prepared for the impact of this.

Tax incentives are key for developing electric vehicles. There are good incentives at the high end of the market but need incentives across the board. The public need to be encouraged to take action that benefits them, rather than relying on altruism.

Fuel Poverty and Tariff Switching

The government likes to grasp what it perceives as solutions to fuel poverty, such as switching or price caps.

The process of consumers switching suppliers and tariffs needs to be carefully considered. Smaller energy companies often offer low costs initially to customers to gain their business, then raise costs once they have these customers. This is their core business model.

Investment

One of the biggest changes that could occur would be recognition that networks and suppliers are different. Networks and suppliers could be properly separated to avoid

confusion. Significant investment in infrastructure is required and this could involve nationalisation in some form.

The concept of negawatts – the theoretical unit of power representing the amount of electricity saved – is a misunderstood concept and one which requires education and discussion.

Grid constraints remain an issue with SSE looking at reducing these in Dumfries. They act as a barrier to all new energy development. Better balance of supply and demand could play a role in dealing with this problem.

Community

Energy is viewed as a far-off issue that does not immediately impact on people's lives. Energy needs to be built into planning decisions, with how systems work at local levels considered. Until recently energy has been considered a national, not local issue.

The concept of what constitutes a community in Scotland has changed considerably over the decades. Energy was not something that was considered in great detail in the past. There is a lack of funding going to local communities and perhaps not the cohesion that previously existed. Community activism is also less prominent than it used to be.

There is a fundamental issue of how community projects can be supported in the long term. Building stock requires refurbishment and people require expert and impartial advice. A package of reform is required including helping households finance necessary renovations, upskilling of tradespeople to undertake this work, and improved education and increased job creation.

The public needs to be enabled to switch to local energy options. Currently, legislation makes this too difficult. Having the option of purchasing from a local supplier would benefit everyone. Electricity generation in rural areas need to get a fair return but current behaviours work against this.

Legislation is a mix of UK and Scottish Government powers. The whole system is arranged to keep the status quo in place. Legislation is needed to facilitate uptake of renewables and empower communities.

Energy Efficient Scotland Programme

This programme should involve more community energy aspects. Previously there had been money for communication work. The Community and Renewables Energy Scheme (CARES) also previously provided funding for development officers, but this has been discontinued.

The Scottish Government has produced this route map and have invested, but it is not ambitious enough. The deadlines set are too distant and will potentially need to be updated. Genuine local skills supply chains need to be created to bring communities onboard. Value for money does not always mean the cheapest option, rather the option with the best outcomes for resource expended.

One in six homes in Scotland is rural, but rural homes use one-third of Scotland's energy. Any national policy that does recognise that rural communities face larger challenges in reducing energy consumption than urban homes will fail.

Targets

Ambitious and joined-up energy policy is inherently linked to climate policy. The Scottish Government Climate Change Bill would have been more ambitious but advice was received that targets above those now set would stretch credibility. The Scottish Government has powers across a number of areas where it can make a difference. New-build housing, and social housing are areas where change could easily be affected, but the private sector may prove more challenging. Higher standards for rented homes would be one option. Detailed consideration would be required.

It is accepted that addressing the private rental sector is more difficult, but this does not mean it should be separated from social housing or not addressed at all.

Transport

Transport is a huge part of this conversation and air travel must be addressed. It is often the case that air travel is cheaper for passengers than rail travel. The Scottish Government policy on this of reducing and eventually abolishing Air Departure Tax is not consistent with its climate targets.

Conclusion

Those attending the meeting stressed the following key messages to conclude the discussion:

- There is value and opportunity in locality.
- Community energy projects can address many problems including increased renewable generation, community empowerment, fuel poverty, regeneration and investment.
- Early education in science and energy issues is important.
- Energy demand must be reduced. This will involve changing the public's behaviour in significant ways.
- Targets on climate change and energy efficiency should be ambitious.

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