

## **Report of Aberdeen Public Engagement Event**

**James Hutton Institute**

**19 July 2018**

*Note: The following is a distillation of a public engagement event held by the RSE Energy Inquiry Committee. The views expressed at the event are those of the attendees and do not necessarily represent the position of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.*

### Committee Members Present

Prof Gavin Little

Prof Pete Smith

Prof Little welcomed the audience to the engagement event and provided background on why the inquiry was taking place, what it looked to achieve, and what the Committee hoped to gain from holding public engagement events. Prof Little noted that at this stage in the process the Committee was seeking input and not making recommendations.

Prof Smith then took the audience through a presentation on the context of the Inquiry, examining how energy is currently used in Scotland, and where this energy is generated. The room was then guided through the 15 questions the Inquiry posed in the consultation document.

The first point noted that electricity is often confused with energy. Heat plays a huge part in the amount of energy we use; much more so than electricity. It was further noted that there is difference between what constitutes low-carbon energy and what constitutes renewable energy which it is important to understand.

Nuclear power stations shutting down will mean the loss of a large chunk of Scotland's current generation. It is important to retain baseload somehow. While there are concerns over nuclear waste, there have been advances in its disposal which should be considered.

In Germany CO2 emissions are actually rising as they have closed down their nuclear plants. Scotland used to be a world leader in nuclear energy and should be again by building a new generation of nuclear power stations.

There is a bottleneck in terms of electricity production, where we are running close to capacity. If there is a move toward electric vehicles (EVs) then what will happen when everyone attempts to charge their car at the same time? There are significant advantages to hydrogen powered cars in this regard as it can be generated quickly with no need to charge.

If the electricity system is being examined then the entire system must be assessed, not sections in isolation, such as electric vehicles. There can be significant costs inherent in some renewable options for electricity such as prohibitive expense or potential to exacerbate the problem of fuel poverty which must be avoided. The cheapest energy generation in Scotland has consistently come from the power stations which are scheduled to close.

Electricity storage should be an important focus. A large leap forward in storage could serve as the silver bullet. Renewables are important for isolated communities and hydrogen may be an option.

The next attendee to comment highlighted their dissatisfaction that the UK Government had not backed tidal energy more strongly. Doing so could provide much needed energy and put the UK at the forefront of this technology in terms of skills.

It is incredibly difficult to have informed debate around energy issues. Media coverage often exacerbates this problem. Unless the public can keep an open mind on the energy options available to them, progress will be difficult. The overall objective of energy policy needs consideration. Satisfying our energy demand with the lowest resource cost possible is the priority. If the discussion remained within this framework it would be better informed.

Political thinking needs to develop to the stage where a long-term strategy with cross-party buy-in can be created to find a sensible way to move away from fossil fuels while meeting our energy needs.

Overall goals are important. What is it that we as a society count as cost? Outsourcing impacts overseas, destroying natural habitats of wildlife and fuel poverty are all different kinds of costs. New energy projects that may have huge upfront costs could prove much better for society down the line.

The RSE should serve the role of honest broker, providing genuine information and helping people to understand the problems and available facts. People want to save the planet and keep it liveable for future generations, but don't necessarily know how.

A member of the audience commented that it is very difficult to put a fair price on carbon, although it is undoubtedly far too cheap at the moment. There needs to be debate on how much society is willing to pay to consume carbon and how we do this without hurting the most vulnerable among us. It may be the case that small 'pet' projects serve as a way to get the ball rolling. Aberdeenshire Council has a carbon budget and looks to quantify its usage. Projects like this should be expanded.

There may be opportunities to export the skills that have been developed in the low carbon sector. Operational capabilities are strong in Scotland and there are supply chain opportunities.

One attendee expressed concern that the move towards green energy was adding too much complexity to the discussion. The desire to decarbonise by moving away from the internal combustion engine towards battery powered cars often ignored the complicated and potentially dangerous issues of mining and using lithium ion batteries.

Oil and gas are undoubtedly on the way out and communities reliant on them need to prepare for this. Society as a whole needs to look at decreasing demand and examine alternative methods like flexible working which can reduce our carbon footprint.

A lot of the public in Scotland are alienated from energy production. In some remote islands, however, there are innovative schemes which give local people control. The cultural aspect of appreciating the energy we use is often missing.

The importance of regulatory and government systems should not be overlooked. Brexit could take the UK outside of the European market and its regulations. It is vital that we are aware of how governance changes.

**Craig Denham**

**Inquiry Secretariat**