

Towards meaningful public consent for action to cut UK emissions

Stimulus paper for *Engaging the public on emissions reduction* Roundtable, 20 February 2017

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To the reader

This paper has been written in some haste to provide a stimulus for discussion at the CIFF-hosted Roundtable on 20 February 2017. It would fail any test of academic rigour but draws on many years of practical and policy work in this field at the Centre for Sustainable Energy. I acknowledge the tendency toward polemic. That said, the paper is written with a view to provoking your thoughts and (hopefully) to challenging assumptions about the conditions which need to be put in place for success in achieving deep carbon emission reductions over the coming decades. It ends with some questions to frame our discussion at the Roundtable. Ultimately its goal is to help the Roundtable to draw out some clear asks on public engagement and public consent of the Government's forthcoming Emissions Reduction Plan.

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Centre for Sustainable Energy, Bristol, 14 February 2017

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Introduction

Few people would disagree with the notion that the transition to a low carbon society in the UK needs the meaningful involvement and consent of the public in all its various guises, values and predilections.¹ This is because achieving that transition will require more or less everyone to:

- alter their individual and collective energy using, travel and consumption behaviours and habits;
- invest, purchase and spend differently;
- give consent for changes in the buildings and landscapes where they live and work, in the markets in which they participate, and in the services and products they buy or receive;
- pay for many aspects of the transition through their bills and taxes.

Yet we do not appear to be collectively acting as if we understand this by taking steps to ensure that the meaningful involvement and consent embedded in these requirements are routinely nurtured and sustained.

Up until now, this may not have mattered much because the 'ask' of the public in relation to carbon emission reduction has thus far been relatively simple and unchallenging. However, for reasons explored in this paper and already exposed by recent developments around onshore wind, we do now need to define and then take such steps with some purpose. Without doing so, I believe we will be putting at serious risk the achievement of the low carbon transition on a timely and cost-effective basis (and possibly at all).

1 Typically described in academic circles as 'publics' to reflect these 'various guises', I have stuck here with a singular 'the public' for readability, but acknowledge and seek to import the inherent multiplicity and complexity in such a phrase.

This is because, as with other policy issues, public consent is ultimately required to secure and sustain change, particularly where the change is significant and lasting. That consent for (or acceptance of) change is usually contingent upon a range of other factors – including: the scale and nature of the change itself; belief in the need for change and the purpose it serves; the trustworthiness of those promoting change and making choices; the range of choices available (if any); whether the benefits and costs of change are affordable and fairly distributed.²

In sum, the public will ultimately say ‘no’ (i.e. refuse consent) to change they don’t understand proposed by people they don’t trust to meet needs they don’t recognise for benefits they don’t value at a cost they aren’t willing to pay.

A lack of public consent won’t necessarily be expressed as direct rejection or obvious dissent. But it will, as explored here, create more friction in local and national infrastructure planning, reduce take-up and participation in key programmes and markets, and make behaviour change far harder to stimulate. And thus it would reduce policy effectiveness and increase costs.

‘Public consent’ – or the lack of it – is also directly associated with our politicians’ sense of the political space available to them for sustaining or driving new action. Politicians are mostly, by their natures, fine-tuned diviners of the extent of acceptance and/or support amongst their electorate for proposed changes or developments (or even for ‘more of the same’). So, however much we might personally want politicians to ‘do more’ (about anything, not just cutting emissions), their sense of the public’s acceptance of them doing so will tend to trump even what they may themselves believe is necessary and in the long term public interest.

This paper outlines why I think ‘public consent’ in this vital area of policy risks wearing dangerously thin and why effort to build and nurture it is needed urgently. It describes the risks its absence would entail to the success of any programme to ramp up action to cut carbon emissions. It questions whether we can rely – as many policy-makers and -shapers seem to assume – on the emerging ‘low carbon’ markets (in smart energy services, electric vehicles etc) to deliver the public consent and involvement required.

And it seeks to draw a distinction between the need to stimulate specific behaviour changes in energy use, transport choices etc and the wider issues associated with the public’s understanding and sense of involvement in, and consent, for the shaping of the transition to a low carbon society.

The paper also describes the characteristics of that public involvement and consent which I believe we should be seeking to achieve. Drawing on the practical experience of the Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE), it examines the types of interventions which might, and which might not, work to do so.

Finally, I pose some questions to stimulate discussion and debate and hopefully enable the Roundtable to draw out key messages on this issue which we would like to see reflected in the forthcoming UK Emissions Reduction Programme.

I apologise in advance that my focus is rather narrowly on the energy policy aspects of carbon emissions reduction. This is because that’s what I know. I hope the analysis provided here can trigger thoughts and insights useful to other key policy areas – transport, agriculture, waste and resources etc.

2 For a more detailed exploration of these contingencies in relation to public acceptability of energy system change, see Parkhill, K.A., Demski, C., Butler, C., Spence, A. and Pidgeon, N. (2013) [Transforming the UK Energy System: Public Values, Attitudes and Acceptability – Synthesis Report](#) (UKERC: London)

A step change in the rate, scale and nature of change will make policy more noticeable

Compared with the developments over the last twenty years associated with cutting carbon emissions, the scale, rate and nature of changes required over the next fifteen years to meet the UK's latest carbon budgets are of a different order. We have, it can be argued, done the easy stuff.

Most of the carbon emission reductions to date in the UK have been achieved through incremental improvements and/or the acceleration of relatively tried and tested programmes – such as energy saving obligations on energy suppliers to do mass roll-out of relatively low cost insulation measures in our homes, tighter standards on buildings and energy using equipment, agreements with industrial sectors to take steps to curb emissions which are largely in their financial interests anyway.

As a result, such approaches have done little to test the extent or depth of public consent because they have, in reality, asked relatively little of the public. However, the changes required to meet future carbon budgets are likely to be both more noticeable and more challenging to existing practices and 'ways of life'. Contrast insulating the cavity walls of UK homes (largely done over the last fifteen years) with the need to more or less completely decarbonise our heat supply in the next twenty years (barely started).

The 'ask' of the public (to engage with, buy, host, fund etc) from the next, much more challenging phase of carbon emission reductions will therefore be of a different order to that which has gone before. As a result, the scale and nature of public consent for the associated changes will be properly tested in practice rather than simply measured in opinion polling.

That said, there is one area of emissions reduction policy to date where change has been relatively significant and noticeable – the shift to renewable electricity. The emergence of renewables has proceeded apace over the last twenty years with various financial incentives stimulating extensive deployment, mainly by private companies and utilities. And the growth has exposed (dramatically in the case of onshore wind) the risks which emerge if the maintenance of public consent is largely taken for granted by policy-makers and left principally to the devices of the businesses and organisations expected to deliver the low carbon policy objectives (in this case to expand renewable energy).

It is instructive to consider the recent history of this policy area and the warnings it offers for future policy and practice in relation to the much deeper emissions reductions to which we are now legally committed.

The 'commons' of public consent and the associated tragedy: the case of onshore wind

Public support for action to reduce carbon emissions and, more specifically for renewable energy, including wind energy, has polled at consistently high levels for many years.³ When tested in more depth, the public see renewable energy as a key component in a low carbon energy system (which they acknowledge we need to achieve). They value its reliance on natural flows of energy which aren't subject to foreign control and its relatively benign environmental impact, particularly when compared with alternatives such as fossil fuels.⁴

3 See for example the DECC and now BEIS quarterly public attitudes tracker (Waves 1 -20), May 2012 – present day at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/public-attitudes-tracking-survey>

4 See Footnote 2 and associated research available at <http://www.ukerc.ac.uk/programmes/energy-supply/transforming-the-uk-energy-system-public-values-attitudes-and-acceptability.html>

It is clear that the public has absorbed much of the environmental discourse about renewable energy of the last thirty years or so⁵ and locked in a positive attitude towards renewable energy. This public support has underpinned significant policy developments in favour of renewable energy (and carbon emission reduction policies more generally) over the last twenty years.

But sometime in the last few years we reached a point where political support had dropped away. Indeed, it had dropped away to such an extent that it made political sense for the Conservative Party to pledge in its 2015 manifesto that it would stop any financial support for on-shore wind energy and, unlike any other infrastructure, give local people ‘the final say’ over planning decisions. This was rapidly enacted once the Conservatives had won the election.⁶

How did this happen (not least because opinion tracking still reported high levels of support for wind)? It is probably accurate to suggest it was part of a calculated (and with hindsight successful) attempt by Conservative Central Office to protect its shire constituencies from the threat of some traditionally conservative voters turning to UKIP. UKIP had selected opposition to onshore wind as one of only three core political platforms (the others being opposition to the EU and to gay marriage). But this analysis simply begs the question of what stream of public sentiment UKIP was tapping into, which in turn stimulated the Conservative response.

I believe the effective moratorium on onshore wind came about because we had collectively forgotten to sustain and nourish public understanding and consent for renewable energy and its role in the low carbon transition. In addition, over the last 15 years, whatever sense there was of collective responsibility for enabling our energy needs to be met⁷ has been steadily eroded by policy-makers and, particularly, project developers taking public consent largely for granted.

As mentioned above, public consent duly measured in official annual national opinion trackers is found to be high and sustained. But at a local level (which is where wind energy developments were being proposed), developers largely behaved as if (a) public consent was the same as planning permission and (b) that they anyway deserved consent simply because they were doing ‘the right, on-the-side-of-the-angels, low carbon thing’, as endorsed through supportive policy by the elected government.

So the developer-led public engagement focused on their own specific project proposals within the planning system. However, that system provides little room for discussion about either (i) why the projects were needed at all (typically answered only with reference to being needed to meet government targets) or (ii) who stood to gain from the development (typically ignored because ownership and governance and the scale and nature of local benefits are not treated as relevant considerations for the planning process).

The public’s understandable frustration with this desiccated level of local debate quickly reached politicians’ antennae. The dominant national politicians’ reaction was first (between c. 2002 – 2010) to (a) treat such dissent as a small but vocal minority which lacked the right information (so provide

5 Early examples include. M Flood (1986 1st ed, 1991 2nd ed), *Energy Without End*, Friends of the Earth, London

6 Greg Clark MP, Written Statement to Parliament, 18 June 2015 (within 6 weeks of the election) <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-vote-office/June%202015/18%20June/1-DCLG-Planning.pdf>

7 Arguably, over a similar period, the need for that sense of collective responsibility (and associated consent) has grown significantly and become more obvious. The drive to lower carbon emissions is shifting the energy system towards more decentralised generation (thus impinging on more localities) and, in tandem, driving a stronger focus on demand side initiatives which are inevitably more diffuse and typically within homes and businesses and requiring our engagement, rather than ‘out of sight’ and ‘elsewhere’.

more information) (b) address the lack of obvious local benefit from developments by encouraging developers to improve their public engagement and put ‘community benefits’ packages in place as ‘good neighbours’ and (c) reinforce the importance of centrally-determined renewable energy targets in local planning decisions. The effect was to quash local dissent more readily in the planning process (often at appeal stage) and thus increase the sense of frustration for many who were uncomfortable with the centralised imposition of unconsidered change in the landscapes they cherished (enter UKIP). Then (2010 – present day), largely in response to that frustration (and the particular ‘public’ it came from), the dominant national politicians’ reaction was to steadily weaken this imposition and then remove the support for onshore wind altogether. At no point was the response to seek the enrichment of the local debate.

These reactions took place within the UK’s centralised and technocratic approach to energy policy governance. Centralised and expert-led, this approach has established carbon budgets, renewable energy targets, energy efficiency programmes and supplier obligations, energy market reform, capacity markets, smarter grid initiatives; all relying on what have been evidenced high levels of public support for government action on tackling climate change, but with barely a nod to public involvement (or any sense of why such involvement might be necessary).⁸

This technocratic approach clearly works for a while, surviving off some general public sense that ‘something must be done’ (about climate change) and ‘it’s good for you/the planet’ arguments (particularly when many policies – such as energy saving programmes – have net benefits). But, as demonstrated by the situation with onshore wind (and arguably large-scale ground-mounted solar too), policy without nurtured public consent ultimately loses traction and political support fades away.

This centralised technocratic approach was also built into the design of supposedly consumer-facing initiatives like the Green Deal. Launched and re-launched, only to find that the public is deeply unimpressed and unengaged by a programme which the technocrats insist has removed all the barriers to their participation.⁹ Is the smart meter roll-out next in line?¹⁰

Another political skirmish in this field can be seen as an initial warning sign about how easily public consent can be eroded by those seeking to undermine policies designed to reduce carbon emissions. It can be found in the increasing noise over the last few years about the levels of cost imposed on bills by what then PM David Cameron is reported in late 2013 to have called ‘green crap’¹¹. This issue – of policy costs on bills – is nearly always discussed with no thought as to either the benefits provided by the expenditure or the future costs of not taking such measures; it is nevertheless gaining some traction.¹²

8 For further exploration of these issues, see University of Exeter’s EPSRC-funded [IGov programme](#).

9 See National Audit Office report on Green Deal and the Energy Company Obligation, NAO, April 2016 <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/green-deal-and-energy-company-obligation/>

10 The role of Smart Energy GB in raising public awareness and understanding of smart meters could be seen as recognition that some lessons have been learned. That said, its work seems to focus almost solely on promoting the personal benefits of smart meters to each of us as consumers. By not presenting any collective benefits (of, for example, enabling a more renewable electricity system at lower cost), this strategy risks people finding the personal benefits insufficiently attractive to bother (particularly if those benefits are put into doubt by aggressive attacks on costs and occasional technical failures by antagonistic voices in the media – e.g, ITV, [Energy Bills: Can We Be Smarter?](#) Tonight, Thursday 2nd February 2017).

11 As reported in The Daily Mail, 20 November 2013. See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2510936/Cut-green-c-p-Camersons-private-view-energy-taxation-horrify-environmental-campaigners.html>

12 It featured in recent explanations for price rises by energy suppliers (most notably npower) in relation to smart meter rollout (see, for example, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-38852517>).

There is a ‘tragedy of the commons’¹³ dimension to this problem. Everyone with a relevant policy goal or regulatory obligation, development proposal or new service offering gains significantly from the nourishment of public understanding and consent (the ‘commons’ in question), but no one specifically gains enough to justify their direct investment in securing it. So no one takes it on and everyone free-rides, eroding public consent in the process as people feel ignored or irrelevant to decisions which affect them (the ‘tragedy’).

Moreover, while there are those who would gain from the commons being nurtured, there are also many commercial interests with a direct stake in weakening action to curb carbon emissions. And these commercial interests can align with those political interests who doubt the value of action on carbon emissions. Between them they can cast doubt, sow dissent, and highlight downsides, with the specific intention of undermining public consent for action.

As the scale and nature of change required to meet future carbon emission goals steps up a level over the next few years, so these countervailing forces will, in the metaphor adopted here, seek more aggressively to defile the commons. That will only serve to make the challenge of nurturing and sustaining public consent even greater – and the need for clear and deliberate action to meet that challenge even stronger.

Is there a warning for action on carbon emissions in the Brexit vote?

The rejection of the EU by a (slim) majority in the Brexit vote in June 2016 may offer a glimpse of how policy support for action to cut carbon emissions may be undermined if more is not done to nurture public understanding, involvement and consent.

What we now have to call ‘elites’ have been pursuing a social and economic programme which is justified and beneficial in their eyes and which has, by and large, enjoyed popular support in general (though not always in the particular). But they were forgetting (for about 30 years) to spend time engaging with, listening to, and developing understanding amongst ‘the general population’ of what it was all for and why it was the best course to follow, perhaps adjusting that course slightly in response to what they had heard. In their case, it was deepening membership of the EU. In our case, it’s action on reducing carbon emissions.

But, for reasons outlined in the opening paragraph of this paper, the transition to a low carbon society arguably requires the direct involvement and consent of ‘the people’ far more directly and obviously than membership of the EU because it will result in more tangible and noticeable changes in the way we have to live our daily lives and the choices available to us.

Why nurturing the ‘commons’ of public consent can’t be reliably left to markets

The next phase of policies to drive carbon emission reductions will, if successful, see huge and potentially valuable developments in markets for smart energy services (such as demand response), building retrofit, renewable heat, electric vehicles, to name but a few.

The expectation of policy makers will be that their policies will create hosts of existing and new enterprises, each with a strong vested interest in seeing their market succeed. Judging from past

13 As explored by Lloyd, William Forster (1833). [Two lectures on the checks to population](#). England: Oxford University. Hardin, G (1968). "The Tragedy of the Commons". *Science*. 162 (3859): 1243–1248. (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragedy_of_the_commons for more detail)

experience, this expectation will be accompanied by an assumption that, once the right policy instruments are in place to create value for delivering the carbon emission reductions, these vested interests can be left to themselves to build the market and secure their success.

It would be great if this proved to be the case. However, the omens are not good, particularly because these markets will only emerge with deliberate policy intervention designed to change practices by households, businesses and others which in many cases only really have to change because of the need to reduce carbon emissions.

This reality of why change needs to happen will naturally tend to create resistance in some quarters to change because it results principally from government intervention. We cannot assume people will embrace the changes as ‘the normal march of progress’ (to which there seems to be an element of resigned acceptance).

And this reality more or less guarantees a cohort of existing enterprises with a keen interest in seeing the new policies and their resulting market fail (because they undermine a currently successful, but high carbon, business model).

But most importantly, this assumption denies the ‘tragedy of the commons’ analysis outlined above – in which every enterprise benefits from a successful (albeit government policy driven) market full of willing, ‘consenting’ customers, but no one benefits enough to justify their direct investment in securing it. So, as mentioned above, no one takes it on and everyone free-rides, leaving the nascent market under-nourished and at the mercy of the naysayers and antagonists.

This suggests it would be a high risk strategy to introduce policies to drive carbon emissions reductions without some accompanying and separate effort to nourish public involvement in these policy-driven markets and to sustain consent for the changes to current practices which they bring.¹⁴

The question then turns to what that effort might look like, given the range of changes required across a deep emission reduction programme over the next few years. Is there an approach which transcends individual policy areas and lays a common foundation of public consent and expectations of involvement for all future policies to build upon?

The public’s readiness to consent to action on carbon emissions – with encouragement

The good news is that, judging from the extensive work of Nick Pidgeon and colleagues at Cardiff University on public attitudes to energy system change, public understanding and consent to extensive change can readily emerge.¹⁵ Their detailed studies reveal that the public shares a sense that energy system change is needed and that the need to cut carbon emissions is (and should be) driving that change. They found that, given an opportunity, people can participate meaningfully in discussions about the implications of the changes and the policy choices involved. And people working together make good choices – and then have an expectation that they should be involved in decisions about the realisation of these choices.

14 Of course, this all assumes that policymakers feel that they have the political space (effectively their interpretation of the state of public acceptance/consent) to introduce these challenging policies in the first place. It is far from clear they have – and perhaps not even the political space to take the steps needed to create the political space they need to introduce the challenging policies.

15 See Footnote 2

So the consent we need exists. But it's latent, a potential which needs specific stimulus and nourishment to come to life and become the sense of involvement, influence and agency required to underpin a programme of policies to secure deep reductions in carbon emissions.

The Cardiff University team's work also suggests that much of current practice in energy system development and policy-making was likely to quash rather than nurture this potential for consent. This was particularly from the tendency to focus direct engagement with the public on a specific 'what' of energy system change (e.g. a wind farm here – see above) while failing to stimulate any direct engagement about the 'why' (e.g. what purpose is served) and 'how' (e.g. who decides and who pays and who profits) of the change. It was as much these 'why' and 'how' questions with which people were expecting to explore and engage as the 'what' questions more typically asked of them through the planning system.

To this, from our own practical experience at CSE, we would add a 'where' question, finding (as outlined below) a strong interest from people in ensuring that their views of what they value in their localities – from landscapes to built heritage – are reflected in deliberations.

Evidence from DECC/BEIS public attitude trackers over the years¹⁶ hints at a possible reason why this 'latent' consent seems to appear when people are brought together locally – the effect of social normalisation. When in 2010 people were asked whether they would support or oppose a wind farm development in their area, 73% said they would be supportive (only 7% would strongly oppose). However, when asked whether they thought their local community would support or oppose the same development, they thought only 53% would support it and levels of strong opposition were thought to be nearly double actual views. A more recent study¹⁷ has tested this further and found that only 10% of people thought the percentage of local people in support was as high as it actually was; most thought it was much lower.

This stark but incorrect distinction people seem to be making between their own views and those of their neighbours is directly challenged when local people come together to discuss energy system change in their vicinity. They find out that more people (than they thought) think like they do and, as a result, they feel more confident in exploring options and discussing what they see as a potentially positive change for their locality. Their views become 'normal' whereas before they presumably felt they were atypical outliers unlikely to have much influence.

Meaningful public consent and how to nourish it – our experience

So what does meaningful consent look like and what needs to happen to establish it? The meaningful (but latent) consent that the Cardiff University team's work revealed is much richer than the desiccated version which can emerge from the planning system. Instead it embraces:

- a sense of involvement in, and understanding of, decisions being taken locally;
- people's feeling for the character and value of the local landscape and built heritage and what protecting it means in its broadest, long term sense;
- an appreciation of the way in which a locality can contribute to cutting carbon emissions, the options available and the trade-offs; and
- an understanding of who pays for, and who gains from, projects being considered.

16 See Footnote 3 for link

17 Reported at <http://energydesk.greenpeace.org/2015/09/30/uk-public-supports-renewables-they-just-dont-know-it/>

What does that nourishment look like in practice? Over the last few years we have run a number of projects designed to develop and test different techniques, all starting with a place and people from it. This local focus is because of (a) the potential for social normalisation outlined above and (b) the fact that it is largely in the place we live that we will experience most of the change. These projects range from [PlanLoCaL](#), a wide-ranging initiative (2009-12) to support community-led energy development, to ongoing engagement with neighbourhood planning processes across England, to our recent [Future Energy Landscapes](#) project in partnership with the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) designed to develop and test techniques to develop energy plans in two rural villages (in North Somerset and in the Cotswolds).

Common to all is that they involve structured conversations with local people focused on their locality, designed to help them to develop their sense of how where they live can, might or should change to make their fair contribution to addressing national and global energy-related challenges.

From these experiences we have distilled four fundamental premises:

First: That every locality has a duty to make an appropriate contribution to national targets and system changes – there is no opt out because there is no ‘somewhere else’.

Second: That, given good technical information, people can be trusted to make sensible, decent choices.

Third: The conversations should take place with a focus on the locality as a whole and all of the options and opportunities available, without addressing specific proposed developments which may be in play or imminent.

Fourth: That the process starts by exploring what people value about their locality and their lives within it, rather than what their visions are for reducing carbon.

The framing of the central question is also key. We have found that, rather than ask what might be the central political question (‘What are you going to do about cutting carbon emissions?’) which tends to elicit defensiveness or dismissal (someone else’s fault/problem), more positive responses are stimulated by ‘How can we best make our contributions to a low carbon future round here?’ (which embeds a sense of local agency and choices to make).

The results are encouraging. As the Cardiff University team found, given the opportunity and the support, people start exploring options and seeking to understand impacts, costs and benefits. They discuss their own perspectives of local landscapes and built heritage. They talk about the trade-offs such as between, put very crudely, exploiting a renewable energy resource and preserving a view. And they start talking about how they can make sure more of the benefits of change accrue locally and inclusively.¹⁸

We have by no means arrived at ‘the answer’. These are only small scale exercises and we need to do more follow up evaluation to test how the emerging positive perspectives and commitments develop and create lasting space for stronger action. In addition, we have yet to find an effective way to develop an appropriate sense of agency with respect to realising what are seen as ample energy saving opportunities. We also need to test different depths of intervention to see if positive results

18 Indeed, the results are sufficiently encouraging that about 18 months ago I started suggesting that all we needed to do to nourish public consent for a low carbon future was hold ½ a million meaningful discussions on sustainable energy. See, for example, <https://greenallianceblog.org.uk/2014/05/29/my-big-manifesto-idea-three-great-ideas-for-local-empowerment/#more-4588>

can be achieved with less external input and to explore how to disseminate readily skills and expertise to run sessions successfully across far more localities. But the success of these initiatives shows what can be done and how readily and positively the public will respond, given the opportunity.

Proposed questions to stimulate discussion at the Roundtable.

1. Describe your three main thoughts/insights from reading this paper (they can be positive or negative!)
2. How important do you feel the issue of public involvement and consent described in this paper are for the long-term success of the Emissions Reduction Plan and the policies and programmes the government will be looking to stimulate?
3. What other examples have you come across of activities and interventions to stimulate greater public understanding and enthusiasm for energy system change/a low carbon future?
4. What would a programme of work to develop and test different approaches look like?
5. What are the key messages about these issues you would like to see in the forthcoming Emissions Reduction Plan?

Distinguishing between public engagement to stimulate behaviour change and public engagement to nurture the commons of public consent for change

Judging from recent discussions I have encountered, we are often in danger of conflating (a) the need to engage the public to stimulate behaviour change (particularly around particular technologies or energy- or transport-using habits) and (b) the need to engage the public to nurture the commons of public consent for change explored here. I think it would be useful to draw a much clearer distinction between these two purposes.

This is partly because the read across from one to the other may well not be very great (particularly from specific behaviour change to generalised public consent).¹⁹ And it is partly because the techniques for engaging around behaviour change are necessarily far more tightly focused and specific. It is also worth making a clear distinction because one need (to achieve specific changes in behaviour) is starting to become an integral part of policy development and service design, while the other need (to nurture public consent) is still largely absent from policy discussions and yet, as argued here, could prove vital to long term policy success (and may be a necessary condition for success of future behaviour change initiatives).

It is probably worth emphasising, while making these distinctions, that what I am saying is needed is very different from putting more effort into convincing people that the threat of climate change requires action (the vast majority already agrees) or that renewable energy, smart meters, more energy efficiency, cleaner better public transport etc are important components of a strategy to cut carbon emissions (again, the vast majority agrees)²⁰.

Instead, we are proposing deliberate structured effort to turn the existing (but largely latent) acceptance of change into active understanding of the nature of changes required, comprehension of what it might mean in our localities and in our lives, and commitment to consenting to and participating positively in those changes.

19 That said, there is some evidence that structured discussions with people about their views on the energy system and how it should change (i.e. more of the type designed to stimulate public consent) do translate into direct changes in energy use at home (without specific intention by researchers), e.g. Diaz-Rainey, I, Metcalf, P, Monahan, J, Peters, M and Tinch, R (2004) *Powergen Energy Monitor 2004*, UEA

20 See evidence from BEIS/DECC public attitudes tracker (see Footnote 3 for link)