

The Centre for
Sustainable Energy
Switched on
since 1979

The Centre for
Sustainable Energy
Thirty years
in thirty seconds

We are an independent national charity that shares our knowledge and practical experience to help people change the way they think and act on energy.

Our vision is a world where sustainability is second nature, carbon emissions have been cut to safe levels and fuel poverty has been replaced by energy justice.

Achieving this vision requires a huge and urgent transformation in society. Current thinking and current activity are insufficient.

Changing the way we all think and act on energy is at the heart of this transformation. It is also at the heart of our work.

Well, we did say 'thirty seconds'. For a deeper insight into our approach to making this transformation, you can read the thirty-minute version that follows or visit www.cse.org.uk

The Centre for
Sustainable Energy
Thirty years
in thirty minutes

In thirty minutes

At the age of thirty, we like to think we've learned a fair bit about what helps and what hinders the transformation to a sustainable energy future. In particular we've learned that far more happens, and it happens more quickly, if we focus on enabling and supporting other people to take action within their own homes, communities and organisations.

Indeed – and this is as true for others as it is for us – if we act only in our own name and if we try to impose solutions on people, our influence will be limited and the change we want to see won't happen.

We know that our greatest impact comes by combining energy expertise with skills in engaging people and imparting knowledge.

We apply this combination to a web of interacting activities designed to transform: Nurturing new ideas; Doing what's needed in our locality; Empowering others to act; Building understanding, learning lessons; and Influencing policy and practice.

But we're only thirty, so we're still learning.

When we started out in 1979 we were virtually alone in the UK as a local energy agency. We take great inspiration from knowing we are now part of a fantastic mobilisation of human endeavour focused on tackling climate change and securing a genuine sustainable energy future.

Reaching thirty seems like a good moment to assess our impact so far. The trouble is that record keeping wasn't exactly a hallmark of our early years – and we still struggle to keep tabs on the impact of all our activities. However, we estimate – as best we can – that in the last thirty years we have:

- Provided high-quality, tailored energy advice to nearly **250,000** local people helping them take control of their energy use at home
- Directly assisted more than **60,000** local, low-income households and reduced their risk of fuel poverty through advice, benefits take-up support and energy efficiency measures
- Trained, supported and empowered more than **30,000** people to take action on sustainable energy within their own organisations and communities across the UK, either as volunteers or in their professional lives
- Reached **50,000** young people with our high-quality education programmes*, helping them become influential energy activists in their own homes and schools.

We've also stimulated national policy change and development in the specific fields of: area-based targeting of fuel poverty programmes; improved consumer feedback on energy consumption; better policing of energy suppliers' so-called 'social tariffs'; new performance targets for local authorities on climate change and fuel poverty; and community engagement in sustainable energy developments.

Measuring our real impact on carbon dioxide emissions is a little harder since much of our work is about motivating and enabling others to take action, rather than making direct interventions of our own. But we've tried.

We think that, ignoring the positive impact of our policy influence, our work over the last thirty years has probably led to a reduction in lifetime carbon dioxide emissions of over **2.2 million tonnes**.

* though if teachers have done what they tell us – carried on using the resources in future years – it could be several times this figure.

Nurturing new ideas

Current approaches to cutting carbon emissions and tackling fuel poverty aren't achieving enough.

Instead of 'business as usual' we need some 'unusual business'. From the inspiration of the Low Energy House in the 1980s to the energy advice pilots in the early 1990s, and from Community Action for Energy in the early 2000s to new ways of engaging the 'unengaged' in recent years, CSE has always maintained an inventive, pioneering streak, challenging the status quo.

We aim to stimulate the growth of new thinking which, when it works, transforms the mainstream and accelerates change.



Doing what's needed in our locality

It's been one of CSE's aims from the start; to ensure sustainable energy services are available locally and delivered to a high quality.

This is why we undertake energy saving initiatives in Avon and Somerset, often in partnership with local councils and other specialist agencies. Going into our community gives us genuine connections with tens of thousands of local people every year. It helps us understand their needs when it comes to energy. And it gives us direct experience of the strengths and weaknesses of mainstream energy saving programmes.



Empowering others to act

We realised early on that our impact would be greatly enhanced by sharing our experience and knowledge.

Sharing is now central to our work, and expressed through training, expert advice and support for people and organisations across the UK, energising them to make a difference in their own spheres of influence. We believe that unleashing the capacity of others, rather than trying to 'do it ourselves', is the most effective way we can help to achieve the scale and speed of change needed.



Building understanding, learning lessons

We research and analyse aspects of sustainable energy to understand better the challenges we face and the quality of solutions being proposed.

We get to know what does and doesn't work and use this knowledge to inform and improve our own practice and that of others. And most importantly we can enhance understanding within government and identify policy changes that will accelerate progress.



Influencing policy and practice

By communicating our insights and sharing our experience with policy-makers, we seek to improve the policies and practices which shape the energy choices and opportunities available to us all.

Better policies can deliver faster, more profound change. And they reinforce the efforts of organisations like CSE, and the many groups that are now doing such good work across the UK, to bring a low-carbon future closer.



Thirty reasons we feel proud of CSE

Reaching thirty years of age doesn't justify too much self-centred reflection. When we were 25 years old in 2004, we drew up the lessons we'd learned in our first quarter century and which we still struggle to apply (still downloadable at www.cse.org.uk/25).

But we do want to share our sense of achievement and pride.

So we asked our people what made them proud of CSE and the work we do.

And here's a snapshot, in no particular order, of the thirty things we came up with, from our underlying philosophy to our feelings about our colleagues.



01 “I’m proud that the insight shared by CSE’s founders – that technical solutions to social and environmental problems need real human engagement to succeed – remains central to our work 30 years later.”

02 “Today I did an ‘energy-advice surgery’ and was fielding questions from a group of mums for almost two hours. They wanted to know about everything – insulation, heating grants, switching fuel suppliers, options for housing association tenants, how to treat damp. They put my knowledge to the test, but I knew I was really helping them.”

03 “I feel good that CSE provides a professional and efficient service whilst retaining its friendly and approachable style. Callers to the advice centre are often amazed that they get to speak to a ‘real person’ who knows what they are talking about.”

04 “I’m always struck by CSE’s openness – the amount of stuff we put into the public domain for others to use and share. Someone rings up to ask permission to reproduce an article or some statistics and we say ‘go ahead!’”

05 “I’m most proud of our ability to turn good ideas and intentions into practical projects that really help people and the environment.”

06 “CSE is good at getting people together and creating a buzz. I’m proud that when we run a training course or an event we try to explore the subject in a fun and informative way while making sure we pass on knowledge and skills.”

07 “Although we’re a charity and a bit alternative we’re really good at reporting and finances, meaning we can influence and work with – and are respected by – much bigger, more mainstream organisations.”

08 “I feel proud to be involved in projects like Warming Bristol. I’ve visited many vulnerable people in their homes to give energy advice. Our personal service can make the difference between living in a cold, damp property or a warm, dry one. Last winter I visited a 70-year-old man who had no more money for his meter, so he couldn’t heat his home or cook anything. And it was ten days before his pension. I arranged for his electricity supplier to reconnect him that day and reset his immersion heater so it wasn’t using the most expensive electricity. He said without our help he would have had to borrow money or gone cold.”

09 “I’m proud that we not only admit our mistakes, we even publish them. Our 25th anniversary report shared insights from our own errors and misconceptions with the world. As we said then: ‘we’re still struggling to find the right formula for success’”

10 “I’m proud of the people who work here. We have a lot of well-qualified people who could probably earn more elsewhere. But they choose not to. We get top students for our student placement scheme and outstanding applicants for every vacancy. Great people want to work here – because we all believe in what we are doing. That’s a real thrill.”

11 “I’m proud that we concentrate on capacity building, not empire building. We show people how it’s done, help them do it, and move on.”

12 “One of the things that makes us special is that we recognise our weaknesses as well as our strengths – and address them by working in partnership with others who complement our skills.”



13 “I think we do community projects well – finding and supporting people who don’t know where to turn for independent advice and practical help. One lady had a debt of £170 because her electricity supplier hadn’t set her meter correctly. She was quite poor so this was a huge sum for her. They ignored her appeals and wanted to put her on a really expensive pre-payment meter. I’m proud that the supplier backed down and struck off the debt after I intervened on her behalf.”

14 “It’s terrific bringing CSE’s work into schools. Children’s enthusiasm for energy saving is infectious; they become energy savers in their school and at home. Small hands switching off lights do make a big difference.”

15 “Each year I train hundreds of people across the UK to take action in their communities to cut energy use. I’m particularly proud of the network of Energy Champions across Bath, many of whom now help to cut energy use at work.”

16 “The office atmosphere is really friendly and supportive – everyone I’ve talked to says it’s the best they’ve worked in.”

17 “I’m proud that it was CSE that sowed the seed of the Community Action for Energy programme and nurtured it to be the success it is today. The still growing network of 4,000 community activists is focused on sustainable energy – and it’s one of the EST’s most cost effective programmes.”

18 “For me the most important thing is helping vulnerable people to keep warm, get insulation and help with their fuel bills. I helped a lady suffering badly from arthritis. I met her when giving a presentation to her care group. We helped her claim attendance allowance which also meant she then qualified for free insulation for her home.”

19 “I’m proud that we’re quite humble! We don’t assume that people are as interested in and motivated about sustainable energy as we are. So sometimes it’s better not to bang on about carbon emissions but to work with their interests and priorities – like poverty relief or better housing – and show how sustainable energy can contribute.”

20 “When we do technical projects we get people and communities involved right from the start. We invest time and effort in talking, listening and understanding. We’ve seen that if you focus only on technical and economic factors you’ll end up with suspicion and rejection, even if it feels more straightforward and efficient at the start.”

21 “I’m proud that we’ve helped community engagement and community-based action emerge as a real focus for national policies and programmes on sustainable energy.”

22 “We get on with working with people and leave the campaigning and tub-thumping to others. And we try not to be judgemental or question people’s values. Surely what matters is what people end up doing, not necessarily whether they agree with you or have pure motives.”

23 “I’m proud that in just a few short years we’ve helped over 2,000 local councillors and planning officers to build up the knowledge they need to make informed and balanced decisions about renewable energy developments, such as wind farms and biomass plants. And all without being preachy!”

24 “A couple of years ago CSE revealed the extent to which poor and vulnerable households were getting a raw deal from energy companies. They were being saddled with pre-payment meters on higher tariffs than the better-off with direct debits. I’m proud that CSE put pressure on policy makers to challenge this. We also exposed the fact that the so-called ‘social tariffs’, trumpeted by the energy companies as ‘help for the poor’, were actually more expensive than their basic tariffs. As a direct consequence, this kind of abuse is now more rigorously policed.”

25 “It was CSE that piloted the country’s first phone and software-based energy advice service back in 1990. It was then adopted as the model for the EST’s national network of energy advice centres. Hundreds of thousands of people now get energy advice every year from a network that started with an idea at CSE. That’s pretty cool.”

26 “I’m embarrassed that a fifth of households in Britain can’t afford to heat their homes properly. People get ill and miserable living in cold homes, so I’m proud CSE does something about it. Our fuel poverty work has made a real difference to government policy, and our Fuel Poverty Indicator identifies areas where fuel poverty is high so resources can be targeted effectively.”

27 “We’re not afraid to try different things – like the 100 Ideas House which was quite radical and generated criticism and praise. It has added to the debate and hopefully helped others think about how to communicate with audiences who think differently from them.”

28 “Nothing sums up CSE’s approach better for me than our work with school children. We don’t treat the children as passive recipients of an energy-saving message communicated through a quick talk in assembly. We respect them as independent environmental decision-makers, able to assess information, weigh up evidence, draw conclusions and identify appropriate actions. Then the children really relate to the issues and become influential energy activists in their own right.”

29 “I’m proud that we worry less about getting the credit and more about getting things done. We’re not loud, brash or big, but we are able to make our voice heard in Whitehall. Some of the most influential things we’ve done over the years – like energy advice services, Community Action for Energy, local authority performance indicators on climate change and fuel poverty – have emerged without our name on them. I like that we’re a charity like that.”

30 “I like the way we try to put ourselves in others’ shoes and don’t assume they think like energy experts.”

It is thirty months since Sir Nicholas Stern published his review of climate change and said the world had ten years to act to prevent the worst of climate change. That was ten years to act. Not ten years to get our act together.

Since then the UK has adopted ambitious legally-binding targets to curb carbon emissions, stimulate the development of renewable energy and ensure all new buildings approach 'zero carbon'.

As a result, the debate is now less about whether something needs to be done and more about what actually works and, once we know this, how it can be delivered quickly, fairly and at scale.

But of the exponential rate of change that needs to take place in society – in how we manage our homes and our workplaces, use energy, live our lives – there is little sign.

Achieving this is CSE's focus for the future.

For us it means scaling up our impact by encouraging others to emulate our work. It means further development of our programmes to support individuals, communities and organisations to take effective action in their own right.

It means ensuring our work is, in the words of our founders, "so fascinating, involving and informing for people that they will take positive action themselves". (UCAT prospectus 1980)

And it means redoubling our efforts to help local, regional and national government align their collective efforts – through planning, policies, leadership and practice – to maximise the impact achieved.

But, and this is something core to CSE's understanding of sustainable energy, in achieving all this we want to see the burden of cutting energy-use shared fairly.

We don't want a society in which poor households are contributing to carbon emission reductions through their deprivation and cold homes; we want them to contribute through the efforts made to improve the energy efficiency of their homes.

We believe explicit effort to achieve such 'energy justice' is one of the keys to unlocking mass public action to tackle climate change. We are therefore developing further our current work on social equity in climate change and energy policy.

Of course, no single organisation has all, or even most, of the answers. But we believe it will be organisations like CSE – mission-led and free of vested interest, offering effective examples, engaging initiatives and insightful analysis – that will be the catalysts for the necessary transformation.

**Centre for Sustainable Energy
June 2009**

“Don’t trust anyone
over thirty.”

**Attributed to
Jack Weinberg
(now aged 68),
civil rights
campaigner, 1964**



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