Public Engagement

Report from Workshop

The workshop on 10th May 2013 brought together a cross section of academics and public and private sector people with a range of experiences in public engagement (see Appendix).

The purpose of the workshop was to:

1. Consider the different types, levels and meanings of Public Engagement & how best to choose which engagement process(es) to use, with whom and when;
2. Understand concerns and barriers around the (wider) use of Public Engagement regarding energy-related policies, projects or technologies and how these may be mitigated;
3. Identify areas for further research or exploration around energy related policies, processes or technologies, where Public Engagement can add value and better informed choices;
4. Actions, Evaluation & Way Forward

It was chaired by Ron Loveland and facilitated by Sciencewise, with Lord Jenkin of Roding providing the closing remarks. A long list of issues was identified and recorded through the day, but there was no process to confirm consensus or to prioritise them. The following is a summary of the outputs based on the discussions during the day and relating to the objectives of the workshop.

Key Messages

The key messages from the workshop were:

1. Need to be clear and honest why public engagement was being undertaken;
2. From the outset, be prepared to listen and learn and be seen to respond to the findings;
3. It needs to be done early to inform decisions and to avoid surprises later on;
4. To be effective and worthwhile, it needs to be done properly, which requires committing the necessary resources that may not be cheap;
5. Trusted and independent agents are the most effective for carrying out the engagement;
6. Engagement needs to be tailored to meet purpose and targeted to ensure the necessary publics are included.

This final point was used to provide a structure for the discussions in the second half of the day; decisions and activities regarding the energy system were considered at three levels:

- National strategic / whole-system decisions or policies;
- Local / regional decisions;
- Individual / household matters.

Each of these levels requires a different approach to public engagement as the publics' understanding of the issues and attitudes towards them differ. Within each level the approach will also depend on what it is aiming to inform, such as the deployment of a new technology, determining options for siting new infrastructure or understanding the priorities and opportunities for new technologies or system changes.

At a national strategic level public engagement can be used to inform policy development and identify attitudes towards particular technologies. Here a deliberative approach was recommended, as the public may not have a good understanding of the technologies and issues. Distinction is needed between the 'public' and stakeholders, but to be representative requires committing considerable resources. However, it was noted that this may be small in comparison to the overall investment and to the implications of not engaging. This kind of public engagement does not reveal right answers but provides valuable information to shape policies and decisions. It also highlights where the biggest challenges to transformation lie, such as flying and consumption of meat.

National level engagement can also be used to understand reasons behind the uptake of particular technologies. An example given to the workshop was research by the DfT that explored the market for electric vehicles and the reasons why it is differentiated between key groups using a segmentation process.

Local or regional matters relate mainly to the placement of new infrastructure, such as a generation plant, routing power lines or development of transport infrastructure. The impact of such projects will mean that issues and attitudes will differ compared to national policies. Engagement therefore needs to early and to encompass a wide range of key stakeholders and include the 'quiet majority'. The process needs to be transparent and honest; the Aarhus principles were noted as providing a basis for a fair process. Decisions about the options must be seen to be based on the discussions.

At the household / individual level there may be a number of reasons for engagement, including introduction of a new technology (smart meters and electric vehicles were used as examples in the workshop), promotion of an incentive scheme such as the Green Deal or to understand the aspirations or expectations for the house of the future. Existing sales, marketing and persuasion techniques along with 'Nudge' techniques are likely to be important. But the priorities of the individual may be limited to the cost of energy and understanding of the wider energy system and reason for transformation may be limited. Individuals may not trust the supplier or understand the technologies; here, local experts, or 'mavens', can be valuable to provide an independent perspective. Engagement is also valuable to understand attitudes, which relates to the national level projects.

The workshop also highlighted a number of issues relating to good practice for public engagement and specifics about the different processes. These can be included in the final report and applied in the context of the proposed structure and segmentation of the energy system. Additional detail will also be added to map out the reasons for, and types of, engagement at the three levels with case studies drawn from the workshop to illustrate the benefits.

Areas where further public engagement would be beneficial

A number of areas were highlighted during the day where public engagement could add value. This was not prioritised in the workshop so further work will be required to refine this list.

1. CCS and Bioenergy require further engagement to understand public attitudes and to inform decisions about their wider deployment. Some engagement found that attitudes towards them, as concepts, put them in the same bracket as other hydrocarbons.

2. Further engagement work is needed at a whole system level to build on recent work and explore specific areas. Perspectives on technologies should go beyond 2050, as this is only a marker in a long-term system transformation.
3. Included in the whole system engagement are a number of difficult to resolve issues were identified that could be important to address if ambitious climate change targets are to be achieved. These include managing flying, with the public regarding international travel as a right; and, restrictions on meat consumption, which is currently determined by social factors rather than the need for sustenance. These are long-term issues that require considerably greater engagement if they are to be addressed effectively.
4. Timing of engagement is important. This was illustrated with regards to the Green Deal, where take-up benefits greatly from engagement programmes. Similarly in housing, training builders helps ensure energy efficiency options are considered and incorporated into refurbishment schemes. Engagement should also be used to inform the development of these specific policies.
5. More engagement should be carried with schools to provide earlier, more speculative perspectives on the various levels of the future energy system.
6. Explore uptake of electric vehicles and reasons for poor uptake. This would build on the DfT work into how to incentivise uptake and understanding of the different market segments.
7. If public engagement is to be effective then it requires the necessary resourcing. This is not likely to be cheap, but is likely to be small in proportion to the associated investment. The consequences of inadequate public engagement could be costly and cause delay to projects.

Next Steps for ERP

The Steering Group are invited to consider the possible outputs for this current piece of work. The project will be presented to the ERP Members for full discussion at the Plenary on July 16. This will consider the outputs of the project and workshop and agree the implications for future ERP work and potential for follow up activities.

1. Write up note and conclusions from workshop, working with attendees to ensure it is representative.
2. Prepare an expanded report that could include:
    a. Elaborate on the points highlighted in the workshop bringing in examples and conclusions from interviews held with experts prior to the workshop.
    b. A map of current public engagement work in the energy system and issues covered.
    c. An overview of the organisations currently involved in public engagement work.

Possible recommendations for the ERP report

The workshop highlighted a number of key messages. It would be valuable for the Steering Group to identify the messages that ERP could support. In addition to providing an overall structure for determining public engagement activities in relation to the energy system, the following key points were supported by the workshop:

- Greater resources need to be put into public engagement to improve its effectiveness, which will help reduce costs and expedite the transformation to a low-carbon energy system.
- Timing of engagement is critical – earlier the better. This will ensure more effective outcomes and greater public acceptance.
- Engagement needs to be honest and as independent as possible.

Potential opportunities for ERP to follow up

Further project work / Follow up activities:

- Dissemination of findings through a short report and promotion of recommendations.
- Provide industry input to the Third European Conference on Energy Efficiency and Behaviour in 2014, with the Energy Savings Trust and UKERC.

Other future ERP work:

- Undertake more detailed reviews of the need and benefits of public engagement in particular technology areas.
- Integrate public engagement issues into future technology analysis work.