

An Observatory for Public Engagement with Energy and Climate Change

A briefing note introducing the UKERC Public Engagement Observatory

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Introducing the UKERC Public Engagement Observatory

The UK Energy Research Centre's, Public Engagement Observatory is pioneering a new approach to the challenges of public participation and engagement with energy and climate change.

The Public Engagement Observatory maps the many different ways that people are engaging with energy, climate change and net zero on an ongoing basis. It openly shares, experiments with, and undertakes these mappings with others to help make energy and climate-related decisions, innovations, and participation more just, responsible, and responsive to society. Through its network, the Observatory makes connections and encourages learning across wider systems of public engagement in the UK and internationally.

The Public Engagement Observatory is a core capability of UKERC and is based in the Science, Society and Sustainability Research Group (3S) at the University of East Anglia. It is led by UKERC Co-Director Professor Jason Chilvers, supported by Dr Helen Pallett (as deputy lead), Dr Tom Hargreaves, Dr Phedeas Stephanides and Dr Laurie Waller. The Observatory works with a growing range of partners in the UK and internationally to transform public engagement with energy and climate change.



What's the problem with public engagement?

Low carbon transitions demand long-term systemic changes and the meaningful engagement of society. Public engagement is now seen as crucial to realising low carbon policies and technologies, shifting to more sustainable behaviours and practices, and ensuring these urgent transitions are just, democratic and publicly accountable.

There are two main ways in which public engagement with energy and climate change, or any other public issue for that matter, has been conceived. First, the common assumption used to be that the public have a deficit of understanding that needs to be corrected with improved communication or bypassed altogether.¹ While information and awareness are necessary, this traditional emphasis on *communication to the public* has proven to be problematic and limited in empowering societal transformations.

Second, it is now more widely accepted that addressing climate change and achieving net zero depends on involving society through more active and interactive forms of public participation and engagement. This has accelerated attempts to elicit public views on urgent decisions in opinion polls or deliberative processes like citizens' assemblies, through to inviting citizens to take action, such as in behaviour change programmes or community-based initiatives. While important in their own right, these mainstream approaches tend to start from the assumption that individual members of 'the public' are not sufficiently engaged with energy and climate change and need to be invited to participate in discrete, often one-off, engagement processes.²

Under this second perspective, there has been a drive to develop distinct approaches and methods of public engagement – whether in terms of deliberation, behaviour change, citizen science, digital engagement, and so on – which tend to be studied and practiced in isolation from one another.³ Each form of engagement prescribes fixed, highly specific, and often mutually exclusive meanings of participation, the public and 'best practice'. The emphasis is on achieving complete representations of, or desired shifts in, 'the public' relating to particular decision moments framed by those governing energy and net zero transitions. Most approaches to engaging citizens with energy and climate change therefore fail to address the systemic nature of the challenge, focusing on discrete forms of participation in specific parts of wider systems and debates.⁴

A new direction for public participation and engagement

Partly in response to deficiencies in these first two moves, a new third way of seeing and doing public participation and engagement is emerging across the social sciences and in various fields of practice globally.² The Public Engagement Observatory, and our work as part of 3S and UKERC, is advancing this emerging state of the art.⁵ Rather than participation and publics being individual, specific, and discrete, approaches in this third perspective view them as being:

- **Diverse** – recognising the many ways that citizens are already engaging with issues like energy and climate change.³ These engagements are not only institution-led but also citizen-led - sparked into being by publics themselves through activism, protest, digital participation, grassroots community action, through to more mundane everyday engagements with low carbon technologies, sustainable practices, and so on.^{4,6} The problem is not so much a deficit of public engagement, but rather a lack of recognition of and responsiveness to the diverse engagements that are already happening.
- **Constructed** – understanding that forms of participation and what publics say and do about energy and climate change are shaped by the settings and practices of engagement, how they are organized and by whom.^{2,7} This means that no single form of participation can completely represent 'the public'. Rather, different forms of engagement produce different publics as well as alternative visions, actions, and views on low carbon transitions.
- **Systemic** – in that different public engagements do not occur in isolation but are interconnected and continually interrelate in wider systems, debates, and ecologies of participation.^{8,9,10} Energy and climate change are systemic problems which demand systemic approaches to public engagement that are made possible under this third perspective.



Mapping public engagement

We have developed this new direction over several years, including pioneering a new systemic approach to mapping diverse forms of public participation and engagement with energy and low carbon transitions.¹¹ Our mapping of 258 cases of public participation and engagement with energy and low carbon transitions revealed the sheer diversity of ways in which publics are already engaging (see Figure 1). This went beyond institution-led processes to also encompass those that are citizen-led, and explored how these instances of participation are connected in a wider system.

Though this mapping method and its underpinning concepts were novel in academic research, we found it quickly gained relevance with practitioners as well. For example, the approach was widely endorsed by the UK and devolved governments, industry and civil society organisations in a cross-sector working group initiative to develop proposals for a *Citizen-centred Low Carbon Transition (C3T)*, co-convened by UK government and UKERC. Through these exchanges the value of taking this new direction in public engagement, and of our mapping method in particular, was emphasised in the following ways:

- It opens up to diverse forms of public engagement that would otherwise be excluded by traditional approaches.
- As a result, it was seen to offer more plural and comprehensive insights into public engagement, citizens views and actions, and alternative pathways in response to energy and climate change.
- It identifies new and emerging forms of engagement that may have been missed, which could raise additional public concerns or be possible sources of low carbon action.
- It shows interrelations and interconnections between different forms and instances of engagement, understanding the effects and the potential for positive synergies between them.
- Taking a systemic perspective creates new ways of understanding the quality and inequalities of participation in systemic terms and can support more strategic approaches to engagement.
- It can inform and enhance the design of new forms of public engagement, for example as we have shown in the case of developing more distributed processes of public deliberation on low carbon energy futures.¹¹

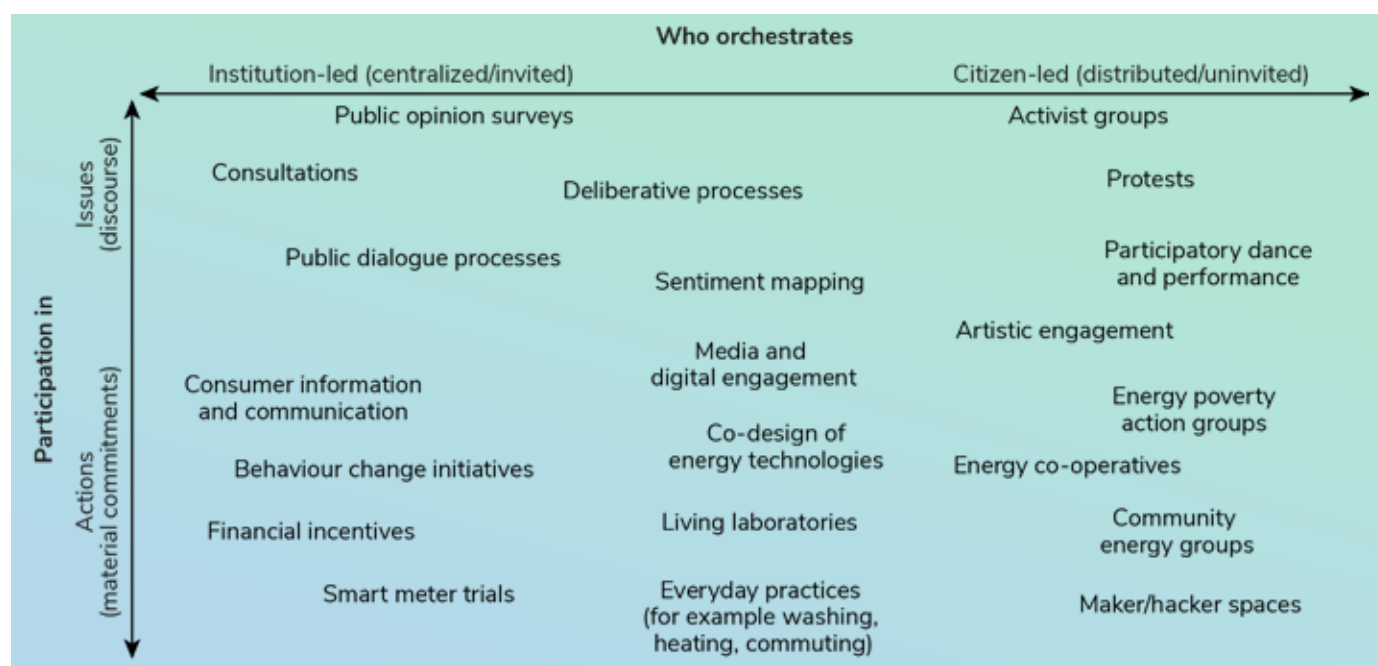


Figure 1. A mapping of diverse forms of public participation and engagement in the UK energy system (adapted from Chilvers et al.¹¹).

Why a public engagement observatory?

This previous work on mapping public engagement underpins the UKERC Public Engagement Observatory approach. The requirement for a public engagement observatory was established in our prior research and through exchanges with the C3T group and other stakeholders for three main reasons.

First, while our initial mapping provided a snapshot of diverse public engagements with low carbon transitions, there is a need to undertake such analyses on an ongoing basis to trace changing and emerging forms of participation with energy and climate change. This includes, for example, the recent rise of climate citizens' assemblies, activism through climate strikes and Extinction Rebellion protests, digital participation, engagements with net zero, and so on. An observatory allows for this ongoing mapping of public engagement.

Second, our initial mapping showed existing public engagement initiatives to be piecemeal, working in isolation and siloed around different kinds of engagement or specific low carbon-related issues, decisions or technologies. In this context an observatory is seen as necessary to help connect, join up and prompt learning between disparate forms of participation and communities of practice across a wider landscape of public engagement with energy, climate change and net zero.

Third, while novel approaches for mapping participation, publics and public issues have emerged in academic research, they are yet to be more widely applied in policy and practice or incorporated into frameworks for responsible innovation and just transitions. A key advance of an observatory in this regard is to collaboratively experiment and test out how emerging methods for mapping public engagement might improve energy and climate-related decisions, innovations and participation processes in real time.

The idea for a Public Engagement Observatory has emerged alongside similar moves to establish observatories on the social dimensions of emerging technologies and energy systems.^{12, 13, 14} In focusing on public participation and engagement we challenge the traditional notion of an observatory as a centralised all-seeing eye that produces definitive representations of external natural or social phenomena.

A public engagement observatory should open up and remain alive to the ways in which publics, participation, issues and actions relating to energy and climate change are always diverse, distributed, contested and in flux. This demands a more open, participatory and distributed approach to observatories as situated within systems, and to alternative ways of seeing participation with energy and climate change. We do this by making our data open access, by experimenting with interactive ways of sharing and making sense of this data, and by creating opportunities for others to collaborate, challenge and contribute to our mappings and analyses.

The Public Engagement Observatory approach

In taking forward a new approach to participation and observatories in this way the UKERC Public Engagement Observatory has the following three aims:

1. To develop and carry out new approaches that map diverse forms of public participation and engagement with energy and climate change on an ongoing basis.
2. To establish an Observatory network to make connections and encourage learning across wider systems of public engagement in the UK and internationally.

3. To openly share, experiment and undertake mappings with others to help make energy and climate-related decisions, innovations and participation processes more just, responsible and responsive to society.

These aims relate to three overlapping areas of activity and research, as shown in the figure below.

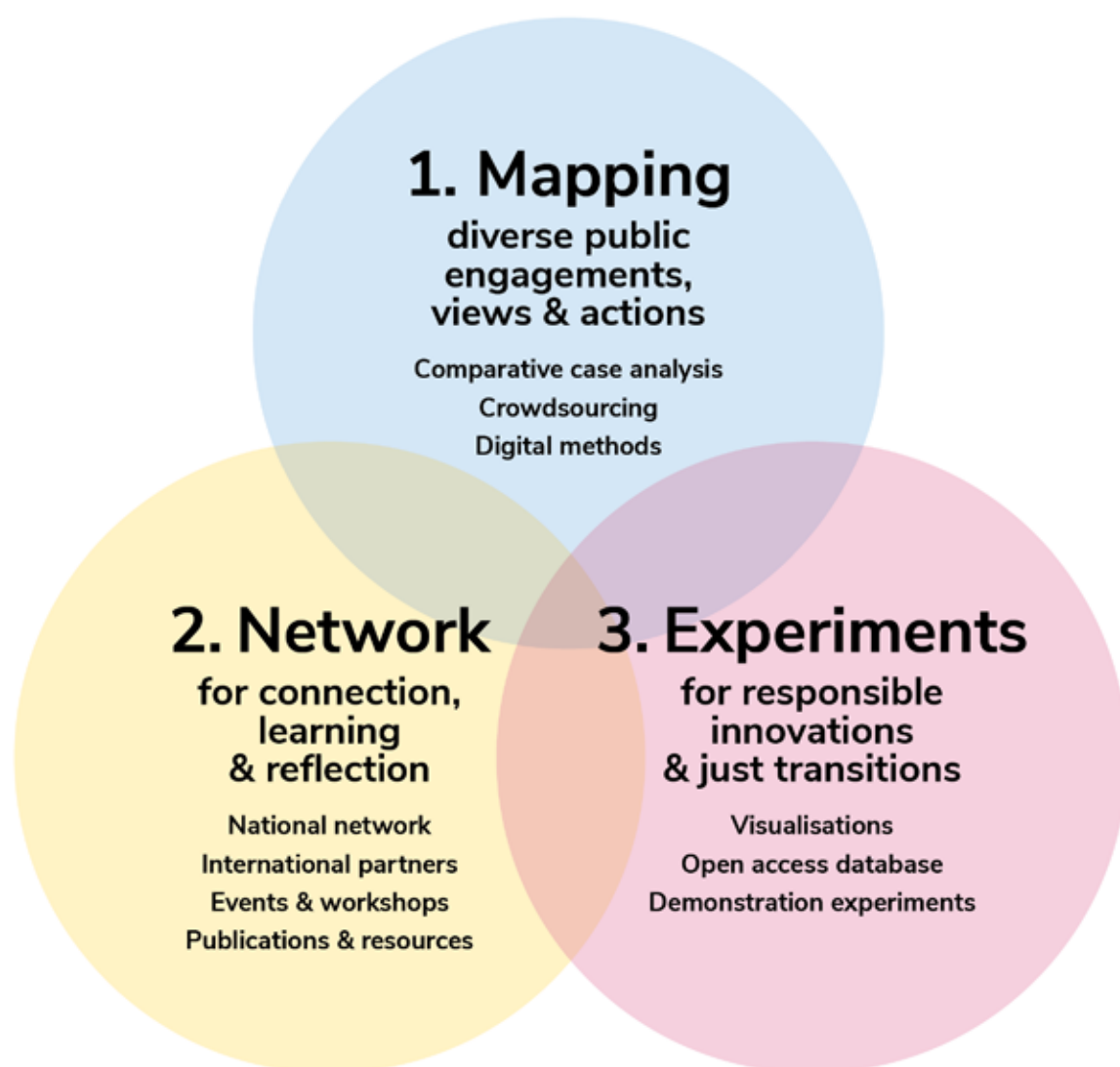


Figure 2: The Observatory's three overlapping areas of activity and research.

Mapping

A core activity of the Observatory is to develop new methods to map diverse forms of public participation and engagement with energy and climate change on an ongoing basis. Contrary to discrete engagement approaches, which adopt narrow and fixed definitions of participation and often claim complete representations of 'the public', these mappings reveal the many different publics and the diverse ways in which they are engaging with energy and climate change. This is generating new knowledge that can offer more plural and comprehensive insights into:

- How people are engaging (the diverse forms and practices of participation);
- Who is engaging (the different kinds of publics and participating actors);
- What these engagements produce (in terms of varied public views, issues and actions).

These mappings also provide novel understandings of how diverse forms of participation interact in wider systems of public engagement with energy and climate change in the UK and in a global context.

The Observatory is advancing and applying three kinds of method for mapping participation.

- **Comparative case analysis:** further developing and applying the comparative case analysis method from our previous UKERC research^{4,6,10,11}, which involves documentary analysis of diverse cases of participation with energy and climate change to map how people are engaging, who is involved, and what they are engaging in.
- **Crowdsourcing:** where stakeholders and citizens are involved in mapping public engagement with energy and climate change from their own perspectives. This ranges from open elicitation calls for evidence through to citizen social science where public participants map how they and others are engaging in particular settings.
- **Digital methods:** developing and applying methods¹⁵ for repurposing online devices and platforms (such as Google and Twitter) to map the dynamics of actor engagements, issues and debates emerging around energy and climate-related transitions, as well as understanding these digital media as sites for participation.

These mappings are regularly updated and openly shared via the Observatory's website which includes an interactive open access database, reports, briefings and academic publications about the Observatory's work.



Network

The Observatory connects UK and international actors interested in public participation and citizen engagement with energy and climate change from different disciplines, approaches and sectors. It serves as a platform for learning and reflection about publics, participation and energy-climate related issues. This is facilitated through the Observatory's network, website, events, workshops, and shared online resources.

The Observatory network comprises:

- A national network: including stakeholders interested in public engagement with energy and climate change in the UK.
- International partners: who are working with the Observatory team to develop comparative insights about energy and climate-related participation across cultures and to advance systemic approaches to mapping participation.
- An advisory group: which oversees the work of the Observatory and offers advice.

Network members engage with the mapping participation results as well as contribute to these analyses and the wider work of the Observatory. Instead of a focus on good practice in specific types of public engagement, the emphasis is on learning about new ways of seeing publics and participation as diverse, multiple and interrelated. This includes building capacities in approaches to mapping participation and systemic understandings of public engagement. The Observatory network also serves to join up and make connections between disparate forms of public engagement and the practices, practitioners and organisations associated with them across wider systems.

Experiments

The Observatory is actively exploring how novel approaches to mapping public engagement, and the additional insights they produce, can make a difference to energy and climate-related decisions, innovations and new forms of participation. It is undertaking a series of experiments to openly share and apply these mapping approaches and their findings with others.

In addition to being visualised through the website, briefings and an interactive online database, the Observatory's mappings are being put into practice in collective experiments with partner organisations in government, business and civil society. This includes experiments to explore how mapping public engagement can contribute to: policies and engagement strategies for net zero with UK government departments; the responsible innovation of smart and low carbon technologies; and the design of new democratic innovations. The Dutch government has been experimenting with our mapping approach to inform climate policy.

To find out more about the Public Engagement Observatory or get involved in its work, please visit our website: www.ukerc-observatory.ac.uk and follow us on Twitter [@UKERC_Engage](https://twitter.com/UKERC_Engage).

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