

People's Assembly on the Climate and Energy Emergency in Staffordshire

March 2022

INTRODUCTION

Founded in 2019 with the aim of bringing people together from across Staffordshire to take on the climate and ecological emergencies, Climate Matters Staffordshire is a network of individuals and organisations from the public, private, voluntary and community sectors focused on engaging with local communities to address the key issues to them, whilst sharing their voices with people in power locally. Such mediation is vital in the context of a decreasing sense of efficacy of the political system to deliver on the concerns of citizens, both nationally and locally (DCMS, 2021; see also ONS, 2022). Historical evidence of the case of Staffordshire has shown how the country has struggled with a widespread sense of disempowerment with local people disproportionately believing they are unable to influence decisions and policy constructed at a local level ([Staffordshire County Council, 2007](#)). Such a deep sense of disaffection and disempowerment in the context of a policy issue like climate change that requires advanced collaboration and compliance with new ways of behaving is likely to have a direct impact on Staffordshire's ability to meet the goals of net zero. Recognising these challenges and the drivers of these perceptions in Staffordshire is fundamental if appropriate actions are to be taken. Finding new ways to enhance dialogue and deliberation is an important element in enhancing the agency of citizens and elected officials to act collectively on climate change (O'Brien, 2015).

CMS has worked in collaboration with Keele University, Staffordshire County Council and Trust the People to design a participatory process which enables local people to share their voices on key issues around climate change. The primary aim of this process was to enable the County Council to develop tailored resources for engaging communities in climate change matters, and to develop an evidence base to use to demonstrate to central government the urgency of further empowering local government and citizens to pursue local actions. In addition, the process aimed to empower local citizens to participate within local decision making and appreciate some of the associated benefits of these processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The climate and ecological emergencies are potential existential challenges facing society. And yet there is a widespread sense that our current policy regimes - locally, nationally and internationally - are misaligned with scientific evidence exploring greater action. The IPCC (2022) outlines that warming should be kept below 1.5 degrees of warming to minimise the worst impacts of climate change, including extinction events, mass human migration and food scarcity (Lenton et al., 2018). Our current trajectory, based on today's actions and policies, is

projected to substantially overshoot this level of warming, with temperatures predicted to be between 2-3.6 degrees higher by the end of the century (Carbon Action Tracker, 2022).

To change this trajectory, all actors need to take steps to mitigate and adapt to climate change. In the UK, local authorities could play a significant role in enabling societal decarbonisation; the Committee on Climate Change (2020) emphasises that local authorities have the potential to influence up to one third of emissions in any given area. Staffordshire County Council in 2019 declared a Climate Emergency, with the aim reaching net zero emissions from the county's service provision and estates by 2050 (SCC, 2019). However, as noted above, in recent times there has been a general disdain towards political decision making, coupled with waning levels of trust and a legitimacy crisis in political decision making (King et al., 2015; Van Der Meer, 2017). This is compounded by a lack of appropriate framework to integrate civil society into policy and decision making.

In the context of decarbonisation, public participation can increase policy legitimacy by enabling the public organisation to be more responsive to the views of those beyond technocratic elites, hence potentially limiting feelings of political exclusion and a perceived unfairness (Tyler, 2000). People's assemblies enable participants to engage with complex and seemingly intractable topics such as decarbonisation, creating a space for a small representative group of citizens to provide elected officials with an understanding of how the populous would decide on a policy matter if they were given enough time, education, and the capacity to deliberate on issues (Elstub and Escobar, 2017). Citizens' assemblies typically deliberate on single issues; however, they can be implemented across multiple scales and address various challenges.

A core tenet of a citizens' assembly is to handover complex decision making to a representative group of citizens, facilitating a direct deliberative democratic process (Warren and Pearse, 2008; Mansbridge et al., 2012). Citizen assemblies can hence play a significant role in modern politics by help by overcoming so-called wicked problems by offering a transdisciplinary approach to issues (Geuijen et al., 2017). They can enabling citizens to look beyond limited conceptions of self-interest to encompass a broader, more cosmopolitan conception of sustainability based on mutualism and cooperation (Dryzek et al., 2011). The deliberative process also develops participants' mutual understanding, therefore, encouraging compromise and creativity whilst addressing complex issues (Carcasson, 2016).

Decarbonising housing whilst keeping residents warm is one such complex issue. Residential emissions are responsible for roughly 15% of territorial emissions in the UK, primarily a consequence of heating and cooking (UK gov, 2020). However, 13% of households in England are currently classed as fuel poor, with this number expected to grow by 50% as a result of ongoing rises of fuel prices (Hinson and Bolton, 2022).

METHODS

Citizen Selection

One of the central tenets of a successful citizens' assembly or jury is the recruitment of a representative sample of the area in question (Devine-Wright and Moseley, 2020). CMS sent out invitations to 4000 of the 129,610 residents of Newcastle under Lyme (UK National Statistics, 2021). This enabled roughly 3% of the population to receive invitation. A two-tiered selection process was utilised with the intention of inviting a cross-section of the community. Four wards within the town of Newcastle-under-Lyme (NUL) were selected to receive invitations based on their demographic characteristics, with an intentional skew towards low income wards as it was assumed there would be a lower response rate in these areas. Each household received an invite explaining the process and what they were being asked to participate in, a demographic questionnaire and freepost envelope (a copy of the letter sent can be seen in Appendix 2). To incentivise participation at these events, an honorarium payment of £75 was offered in line with best practice (Devine-Wright and Moseley, 2020). There was the possibility to host an event of 30 members of the public, however, due to the assembly being oversubscribed, a secondary selection process was used to select individuals in line with the process utilised by Leeds Citizen Jury (2019) on the characteristics of gender, age, ethnicity, disability, employment status and attitude to climate change.

Topic Selection

The assembly in NUL was run with the intention of piloting the use of such processes in Staffordshire. As a result, the assembly did not intend to explore the breadth of topics which have been covered in similar assemblies. Instead a single topic was explored. The organising panel, after several discussions, decided to address the question of how to create warm low carbon homes for all in Staffordshire. This question was selected as the cost of living crisis began to take hold in March 2022 and there was a mutual understanding that this would be a key issue for the community in NUL.

Session Structure

By timing the assemblies over two consecutive weekends, the organising panel sought to ensure that the assemblies had the maximum possible attendance. The aim of the first session was to provide a broad understanding on climate change to participants, information at this event was delivered by Keele University. At the beginning of this session a number of questions were asked of the participants to enable them to share their views prior to the session.

The second session brought in stakeholders working on the issue of creating warm low carbon houses in the region, including presentations from Anthony Watkins, Beat the Cold (Staffordshire's fuel poverty charity), and Staffordshire County Council. After presentations in the morning, participants were invited to engage in a three-hour deliberation session with support provided by Trust the People, specialists in climate change facilitation. The aim of the deliberation session was to enable people to share their perspectives on what they have heard whilst creating an environment for the co-creation of localised solutions and the identification of key constraints in realising low carbon warm housing for all in Staffordshire. Throughout the

deliberation session, extensive notes were taken on the discussions and participants were invited to share any additional thoughts on flipchart paper available.

In addition to the aforementioned data collection methods, at the end of the assembly participants were invited to complete a self-assessment questionnaire which evaluated the impact the process had on a multitude of different climate change factors including understanding of risk, importance of action, topic knowledge, access to information, self efficacy, and general process evaluation.

Stakeholder Interviews

To provide a holistic understanding of the issues related to NUL that extends beyond the perspective of citizens, interviews were completed with key decision makers. Utilising the knowledge gained from the assembly sessions, interviews were conducted with key institutions in the area. The institutions in question had an intrinsic connection to the challenge of creating warm low carbon homes, through policy formulation, the provision of specialist local support, the provision of housing or the ability to build capacity within the borough.

RESULTS

Demographic Data

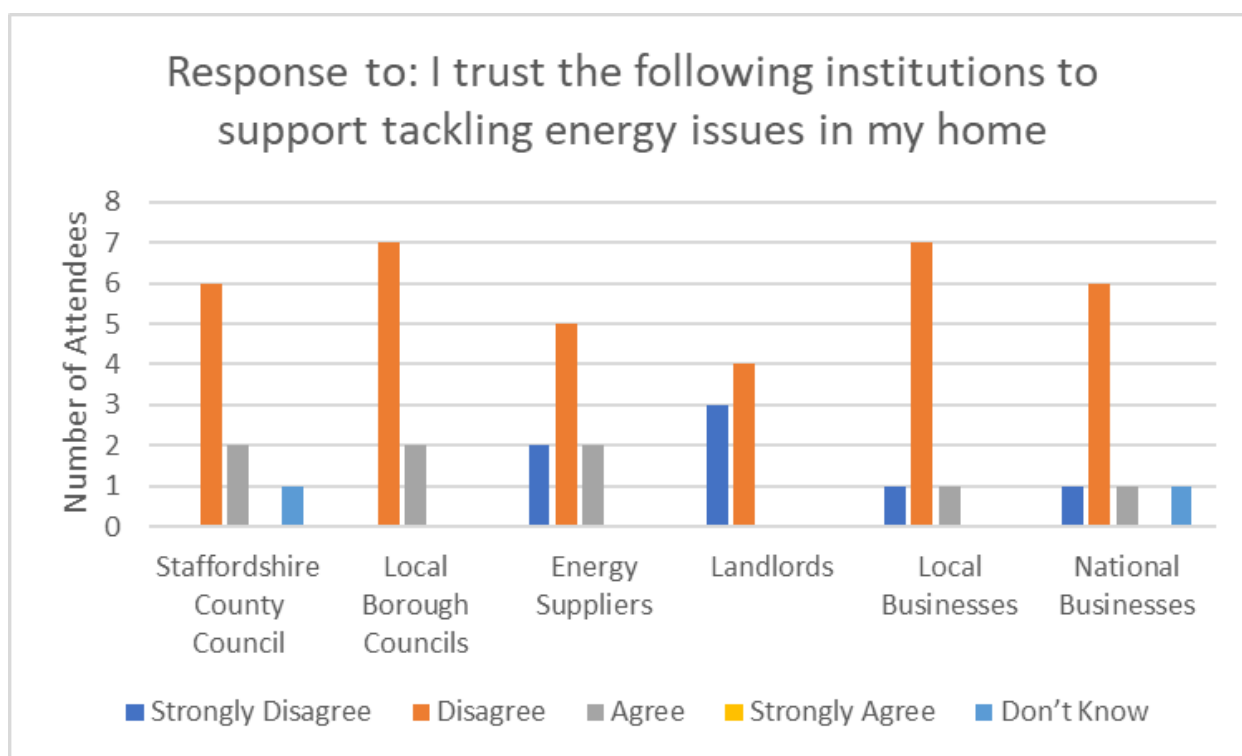
There was an extremely low response rate to the invitation to participate in the with a total of 39 invitees responding, representing a response rate of <1%. When compared to other such events in the UK and globally, this is one of the lowest positive return ratios (Devine-Wright and Moseley, 2019). The demographic data highlighted several key points (a full breakdown of the 39 participants can be seen in Appendix 1):

- People over the age of 50 were much more likely to respond, with 70% of respondents older than 50
- People who believe the climate was change were more likely to respond
- Disproportionately more women than men apply to attend the assembly with over 60% of respondents identifying a female
- The ethnic diversity of the respondents mapped closely to census data for the area
- Substantially more people than the national average applied who had a disability or health condition
- More than average numbers of retired people applied to be involved in the assembly, whilst a tiny fraction of respondents were in full time work

Pre-Session Questions

On the first day of the events, a self evaluation was completed by to share their views on issues such as trust, understanding of climate change and property type. The results from these questionnaires are outlined in Appendix 3. Key findings from these questions highlighted:

- All attendees prior to the learning session were concerned about climate change, coupled with general recognition that humans have the capacity to influence the climate system (only one person believed humans could not influence the climate)
- All attendees either agreed or strongly agreed that they should take steps to reduce their carbon emissions
- Presented with six different organisations, there was consensus that four (the County Council, Local Council, Energy Suppliers and Landlords) have a responsibility to tackle energy issues. However, 40% of respondents believed that local businesses do not have a responsibility to tackle home energy issues, and 12% believed national businesses did not have a responsibility to tackling energy issues
- Notably, the attendees had very low levels of trust in all six institutions to support them to tackle energy issues within their homes, explore further in Figure 1



Deliberation Session

A key part of the people's assembly process is deliberation, enabling citizens to have in-depth discussion about the topics addressed, whilst providing a space to co-create solutions. The deliberation is explored in depth in the table below highlighting the emergent themes which came from the deliberation.

Emergent Themes	Evidence (Quotes and Deliberation Notes)
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<i>Barriers to action</i>	
a) Disengaged Local Community	<p>“Generally there was is a real lack of community connections”</p> <p>“We have a really big problem with antisocial behaviour, it’s one of the major issues which shapes our community”</p> <p>“I will never know if other people need help”</p>
b) Financial Constraints	<p>“There are major concerns about the cost and affordability of changes to households and that we need to use natural resources as well as synthetic resources as best as possible”</p> <p>“One area that should be focused on is accessing finance”</p> <p>“Despite best intentions it is not easy to afford changes”</p> <p>“Fixing draughts has been a big concern since the pandemic and energy price increase”</p> <p>“Very old housing is costly to insulate. Who's going to pay?”</p>
c) Knowledge Deficit	<p>“People struggle to understand insulation and if people should be in fitting inside or outside of their homes”</p> <p>“not all people have the knowledge required to make the changes”</p> <p>“There is a lack of space to share practical wisdom and for so long we’ve been told we aren’t allowed to do things but there are many things we can teach ourselves to do and do it just takes time and research”</p> <p>“We need to educate other members of our families regarding better energy practice”</p> <p>“Where do you go for help and how do I know I need help”</p>
d) Renters power	<p>“Renters have a few options about heating”</p>
<i>Solutions (General)</i>	
a) Clear, trusted and practical information	<p>“People would like to be able to find more information about the impact of what they are doing and buying</p>

	<p>including changes to their houses”</p> <p>“There should be educational community groups....and a place to bring people together to find solutions”</p> <p>“We need plans to provide lifelong learning in the community”</p> <p>“Be proactive and share any knowledge you have”</p> <p>“Educating locally using schools online YouTube channels”</p> <p>“use notice boards in libraries shops and supermarkets”</p> <p>“Use parish councils newsletters and local noticeboards”</p>
b) Access to Finance	<p>“Set up street or neighbourhood level initiatives to make things cheaper”</p>
c) Support to foster community networks	<p>“There should be spaces to learn from each other’s mistakes and to help each other to make sure people don’t make mistakes there also needs to be the access to the tools and information to make changes”</p> <p>“GPs should be asking questions about housing situation”</p> <p>“Bring back community champions”</p> <p>“Be friendly and talk to people”</p>
d) Empowerment and agency	<p>“have more pride in your own patch”</p> <p>“Better communication about which shows what we do well”</p> <p>“enable local businesses and people to lead”</p>
e) Community initiatives	<p>“We need a Facebook group to share ideas”</p> <p>“More allotment space!!”</p> <p>“Utilise heritage assets e.g. former coal mines and warehouses”</p> <p>“Knowledge hubs within the community which are owned by the community and provide practical information and knowledge”</p>

Solutions/Support Needed by Sector

Sector	Solutions	Support Needed (if applicable)
Individuals within the community	Take practical steps which you can afford to keep your house warm	Education on the support available and the measures which an individual can take
	Support businesses which are taking steps to reduce emissions and support the local community	Transparent information on local businesses
	Ask local shops to provide information on their noticeboards	
The community together	Share practical information with your friends, family and neighbours	Easy to understand information which can be easily shared
	Bulk buy resources such as solar panels to reduce the costs	Information on trusted providers
	Organise community events to celebrate success and share best practice	Financial and organisational capacity
	Support local initiatives to enable them to continue e.g. community orchards	
	Contribute to neighbourhood plans	Information on how to contribute to plans and their benefits/limitations
Local Government	Provide clear communication to local residents about what they can do and how they can contribute to key strategic documents	
	Support the creation and operation of a network of communal spaces across the area which can be used to share	

	peoples experiences and provide practical knowledge on what can be done	
	Create multiple different mechanisms for citizens to engage with local government, including spaces for all parties including the community to share their ideas and concerns	
	Make science-based policy	Education on relevant scientific knowledge on key climate and environmental topics
	Advise local health services to provide information on fuel poverty and empower them to prescribe fuel efficiency measures	
Keele University	Provide knowledge and expertise directly to local community in a clear and accessible way	
	Work in collaboration with local groups to utilise their community connections and deliver education on the ground	A clear understanding of all the community groups in the area
	Create opportunities for students to engage with the local community and provide their skills during their studies	

Questionnaire Results

Following the session, attendees were asked a set of questions exploring their experience and how this process has increased their sense of knowledge and agency. The results of each question are explored below.

How would you rate your knowledge on climate change?

Self-evaluating their knowledge on climate change both before and after the people's assembly, attendees improved their knowledge with only one attendee noting that they had an adequate understanding of climate change after the event compared to seven prior to the event. Further, the number of attendees noting their knowledge was excellent increased from three to five. This

highlights that the event did support an increase in knowledge by participants. However, further work could be done to increase the level of attendees having excellent knowledge after an event.

How important do you think action on climate change is?

Notably, the number of attendees who believed the need to act on climate change was very important rose substantially with only one person believing that action was not very important at the end of the process compared to five before the assembly.

How much do you know about how to reduce emissions within your home whilst keeping warm?

The assembly enabled attendees to increase their knowledge on the particular subject covered, although the level of knowledge growth in reducing household emissions was lower than general climate change with two attendees still noting they only had some knowledge on the subject. Furthermore the modal response remained the same both before and after the session with attendees have quite a lot of knowledge but not a lot. This is likely due to a lack of content delivered on the subject throughout the two days.

How easy was it to find information on how to reduce emissions within your home whilst keeping warm?

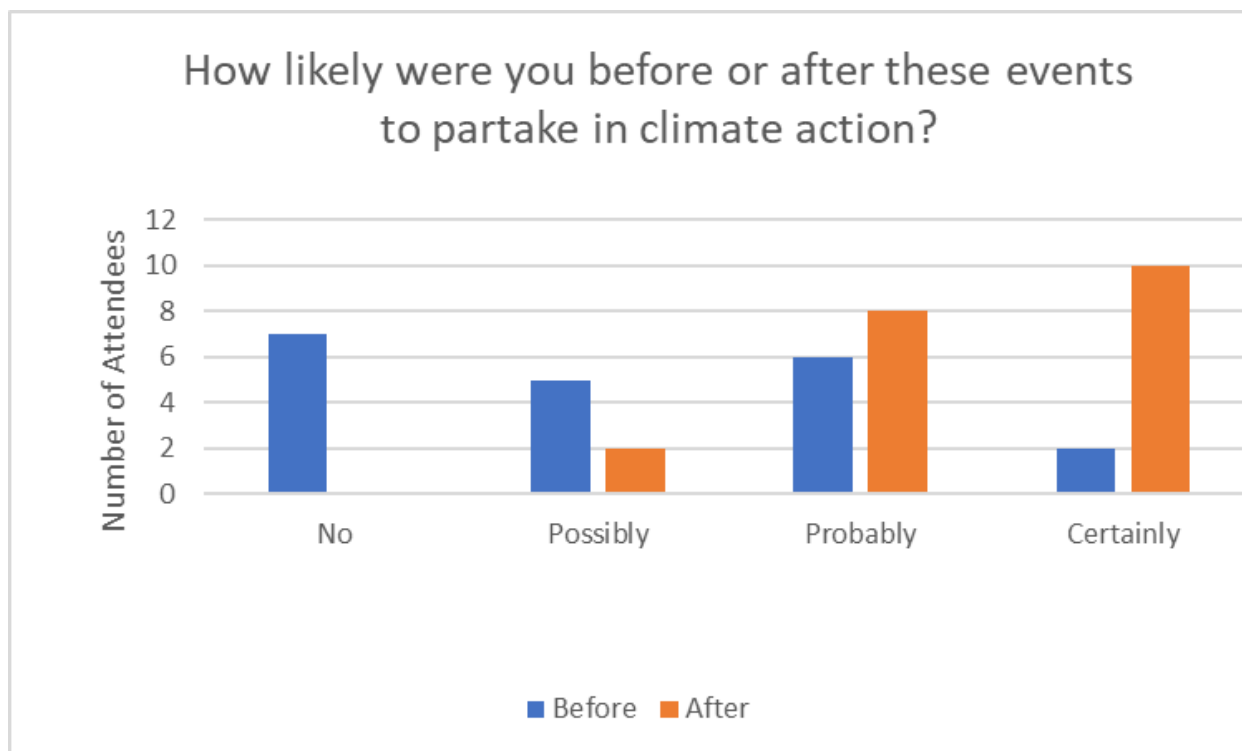
Similar to the above question, the growth in knowledge on where to find information was much lower than knowledge growth on climate change. However, the number of attendees noting that it was difficult to find information fell from three to zero, whilst the number of attendees who noted that it was fairly or very easy to find information on climate change grew from six to ten attendees.

How confident are you in implementing changes to reduce emissions and keep your home warm?

Attendees individual agency to take the steps needed to reduce their houses emissions and keep warm increased, with only one attendee unconfident after the session compared to six before.

How likely are you to partake in climate action?

A key finding from this event was the shift in attitudes to climate action, as attendees were much more likely to partake in action following the event (Fig 2).



All of the attendees believed these processes utilised at the people's assembly believed these sort of processes were useful for local decision making.

Interviews

Beat the Cold

Beat the Cold operates as the leading fuel poverty charity in Stoke and Staffordshire, providing support and resources to people in the community who are in fuel poverty. This ranges from energy advice to distributing financial support. As a result of this, Beat the Cold are well positioned to understand the challenges in the area which may be encountered as housing is decarbonised as well as the key barriers within the community.

Key points from the interview:

Throughout the interview several key points emerged notably that:

- Each household needs a tailored solution
- Higher income households still need support with measures to insulate or decarbonise their homes
- More financial support is needed as people are “reluctant to invest” in certain measures
- More education is needed to help people understand the measures which they can take an important pathway for positive change is through community based initiatives and activities which bring people together

- A variety of schemes in Staffordshire and Stoke were noted including:
 - Green Homes Grant
 - LADS
 - ECO
 - Warm home discount

Beat the Cold also noted several projects they were aware were ongoing including:

- Chase Community Solar Battery Project
- Globe Eco Centre and repair café
- Support Staffordshire and VAST working to disseminate positive initiatives

Key points from Newcastle under Lyme Borough Council

As part of this research officers from Newcastle under Lyme Borough Council were interviewed. The authority declared a Climate Emergency in 2019 with an aim of reaching net zero across the authority by 2030. The authority has a responsibility to support decarbonisation in the area. The authority noted that the housing strategy team within the authority has a key role within decarbonisation.

Challenges

Connecting to the local community

Fundamentally the authority noted that challenges existed connecting with the local community to facilitate the emissions reductions needed with housing. This was exacerbated by the uncertainty on the desire of the community to engage with the zero carbon agenda. As a messenger the council believes it is not suitably trusted to provide information (see Simcock et al 2014). To overcome this, the local authority noted that it needs support to work in collaboration with trusted organisations to deliver housing decarbonisation.

Prioritisation of needs

It was noted that compromise has to be made on key parts of decarbonisation, this is particularly within the local authority as work is completed across the organisation which prioritised action differently. An example was given explicitly highlighting this saying that a trade off occurs between tree planting and CCTV as the trees have the potential to obstruct monitoring in the area. To take more effective action there is a need to work effectively to achieve shared outcomes. In addition, officers within the authority are working on climate change, however, this is one part of a diverse portfolio of work. This could be achieved through greater education within the authority. In addition, officers within the authority are working on climate change, however, this is one part of a diverse portfolio of work.

Costs of decarbonisation

The final area in which the local authority noted they faced a key challenge was in financing the transition to net zero, noting the need for an affordable transition, but also ensuring that carbon was embedded in decision making.

Additional Support Needed

Two key areas of support were identified:

- Support to enable increased community engagement is key to supporting the work of the local authority to decarbonise housing
- Support from Keele to help develop their strategies

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Creating a people's assembly

The methods employed to recruit participants in this event were ineffective, with less than one percent of the total invitees responding positively. This is far below what is expected in comparable events which have used similar methods. Variables did exist between this assembly and should therefore be explored further in future events to understand how recruitment could be higher these include:

- The provision of different and clearer information in letters sent to households, particularly utilising imagery to engage the invitees
- The population targeted
- Improved organisational legitimacy

To improve this, it is suggested that advice be taken and followed from experts in these sort of engagement processes such as [Involve](#).

Operation of a people's assembly

Attendees saw marked improvements in several key areas, notably their likelihood to take action on climate change. However, knowledge growth varied across the key sectors, with extensive knowledge being gained on climate change, but there was limited growth in the area of reducing energy demand in buildings. Furthermore, the knowledge gained did not support the creation of specific policies to be implemented by the County Council. Therefore, this process used in this format can empower attendees to take action. However, further work is needed to ensure it is effectively used as a mechanism to formulate policy, including greater clarity prior to the operation of an assembly.

Suggested Interventions

Collating the insights gained from the deliberation and questionnaires several interventions could support the creation of warm, low-carbon homes for all:

- Increased knowledge provision to the local community, including providing practical advice
- An institution which can be trusted to support the community's needs
- The operation of spaces, both physical and digital, within the community which enable greater community connection and cohesion
- The opportunity to participate in similar events across the area and understand other ways that their voices can be shared
- Access to financial support to enable households to decarbonise

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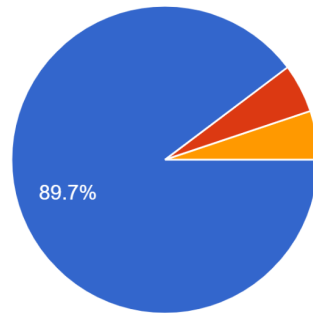
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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 - Demographic data

Do you believe the climate is changing?

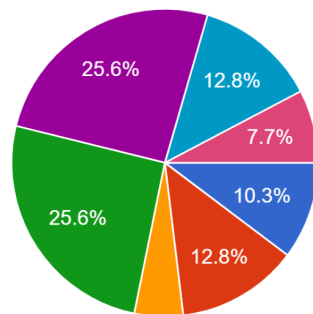
39 responses



- Yes, I believe climate change is happening and it is caused by humans
- Yes, I believe climate change is happening, but it is not caused by humans
- No, I do not believe the climate is changing
- I don't know

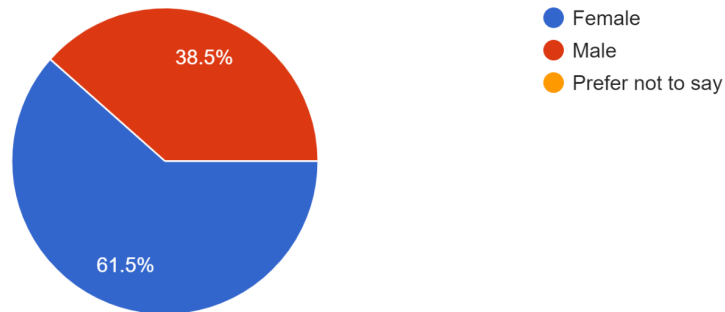
What is your age group?

39 responses

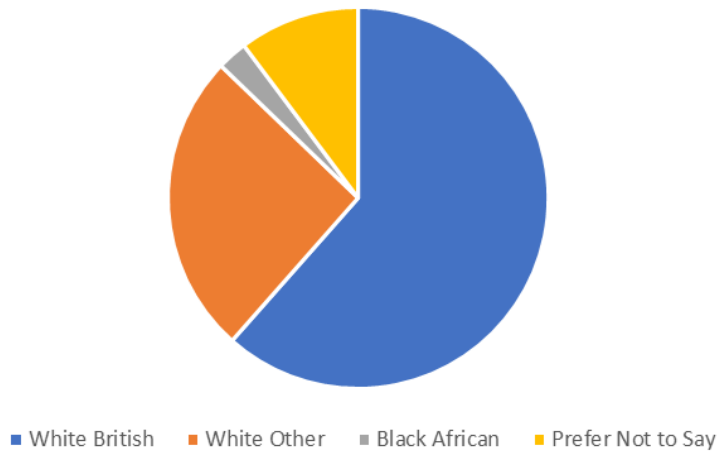


- 18-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60-69
- 70-79
- 80+
- Prefer not to say

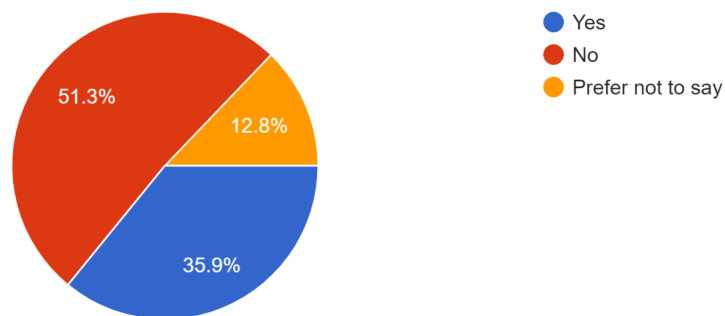
What is your sex?
39 responses



How would you describe your ethnicity?

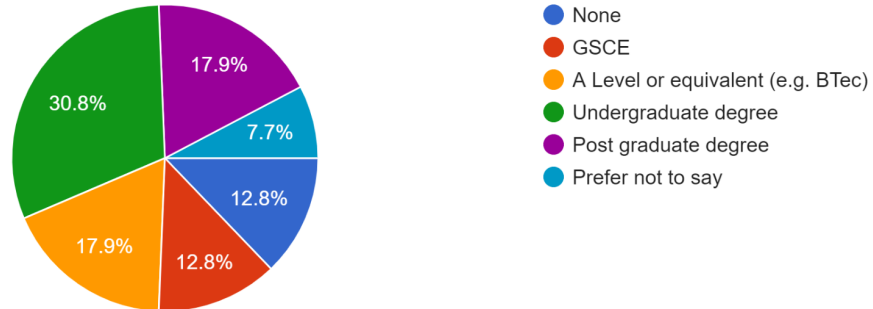


Do you consider yourself to have a disability or long-term health condition?
39 responses



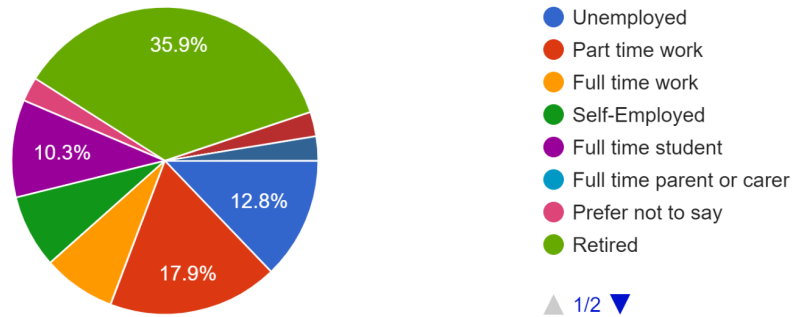
What is the highest-level education you have achieved?

39 responses



What is your employment status?

39 responses



Appendix 2 Letter sent to residents in Newcastle-under-Lyme



Patrons: Jonathon Porritt, Jeremy Lefroy, Joan Walley

Your views needed

Climate Change is a major issue for the whole world and Staffordshire has a part to play.

Climate Matters Staffordshire is working with Keele University to help Staffordshire County Council understand what local people know and feel about climate change and what individuals, councils and businesses can do.

We are looking for Newcastle residents to attend two events to give their views on climate change. You do not need to be an expert or even think climate change is important – we are interested in your views, whatever they may be.

- **Day 1 Saturday 19th March, 13:00 – 17:00.** Experts from Keele University will talk about climate change, its causes and possible solutions. They will focus on our homes, as homes are the biggest source of greenhouse gases in the UK. They will explain how we can reduce greenhouse gases, keep warm and create new jobs.
- **Day 2 Sunday 27th March, 10:00 – 16:00** This will be a chance to talk about your concerns and make your suggestions for what should be done about climate change by our Councils.

Both events will take place locally – we will provide details when you get in touch with us. It is important that you attend both days if you want to take part.

What you say at these events will be written up as a report for the County Council. The academics from Keele will also make recommendations about whether these events could be a good way to involve other local people in addressing climate change in Staffordshire. Everyone who takes part will receive a copy of the report.

If you would like to take part, please let us know by **Friday 27th February** by answering the questions overleaf and returning them to us using the freepost envelope attached, by looking for the online option on our at our website www.climatemattersstaffordshire.co.uk or by scanning the QR code below.

We will confirm that you can attend **as soon as possible**.

As a thank you your time, each person who attends both events will receive £75 worth of gift vouchers. There will also be free refreshments at each event, including lunch on the full day.

We hope that you will find these events both interesting and enjoyable.

Regards,

Michaela Fyson

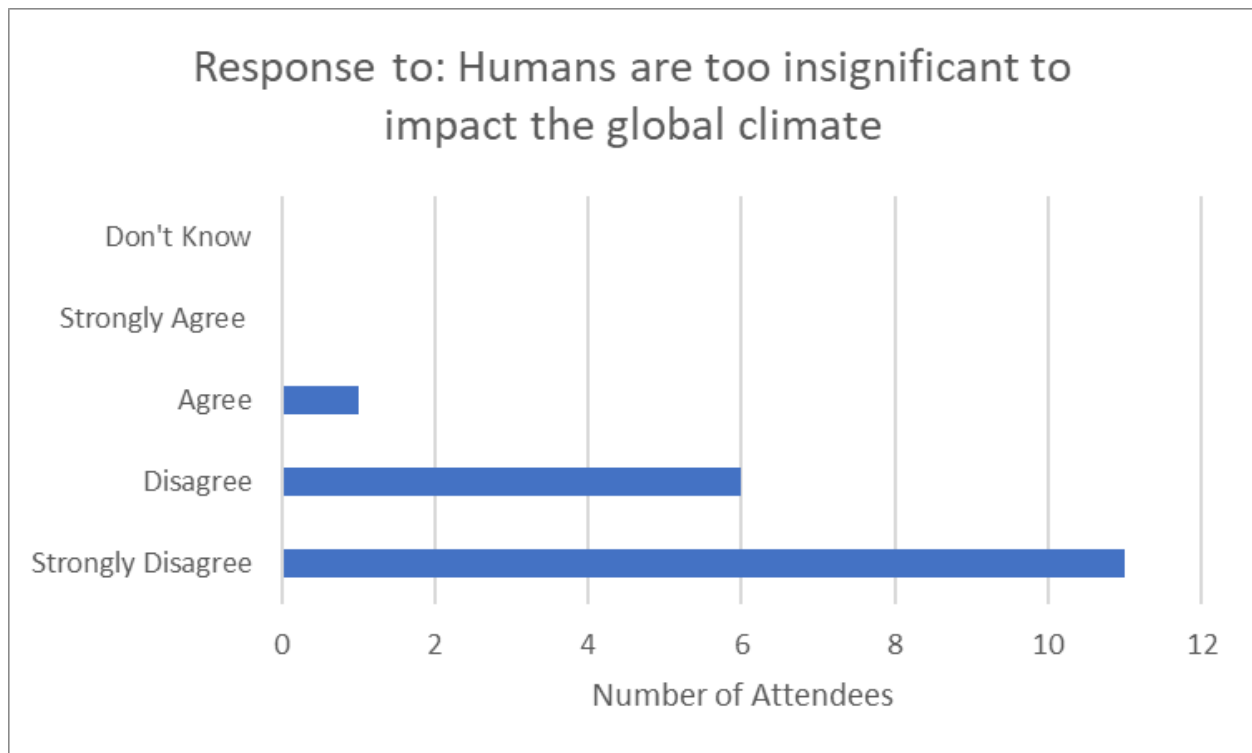
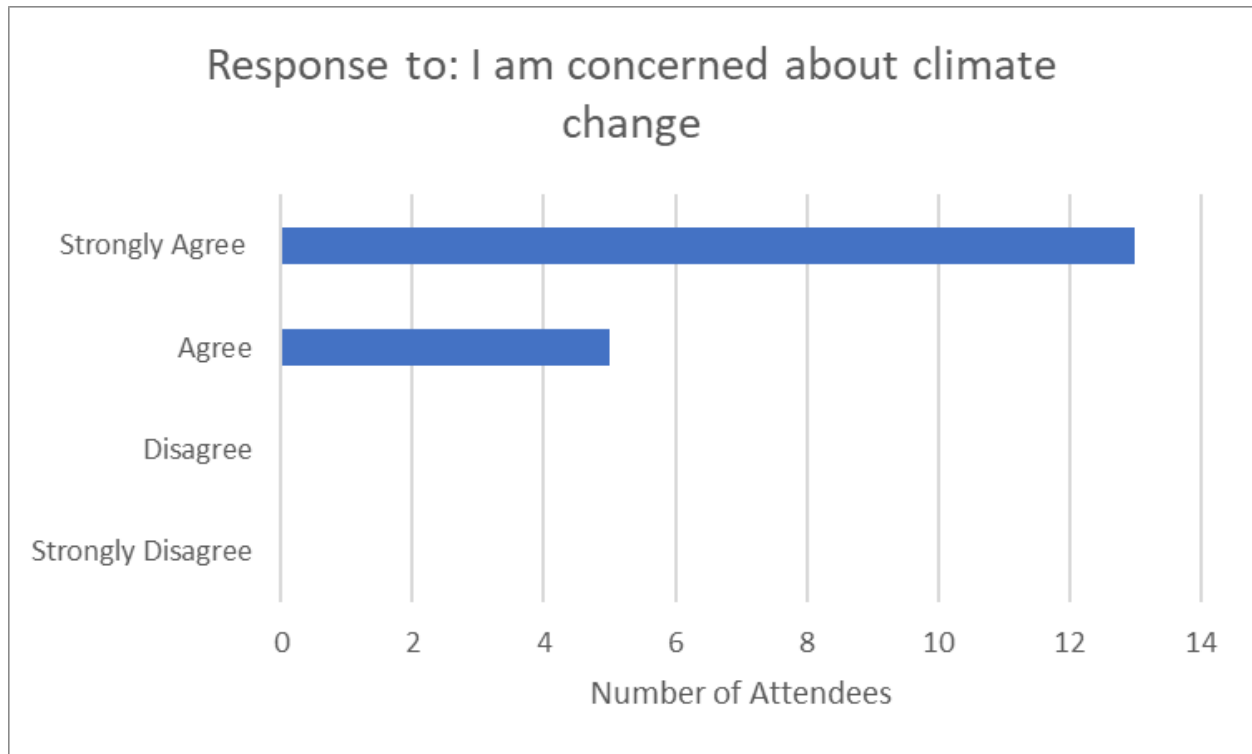
Michaela Fyson, Chair, Climate Matters Staffordshire

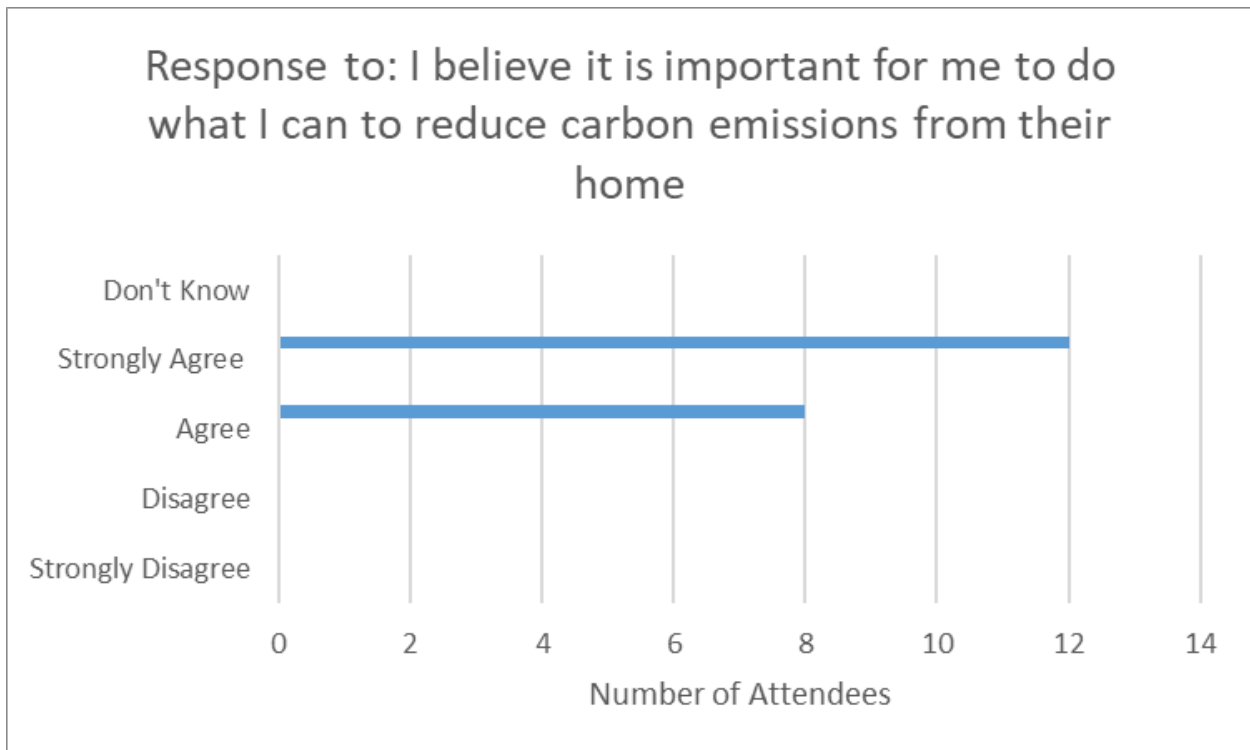
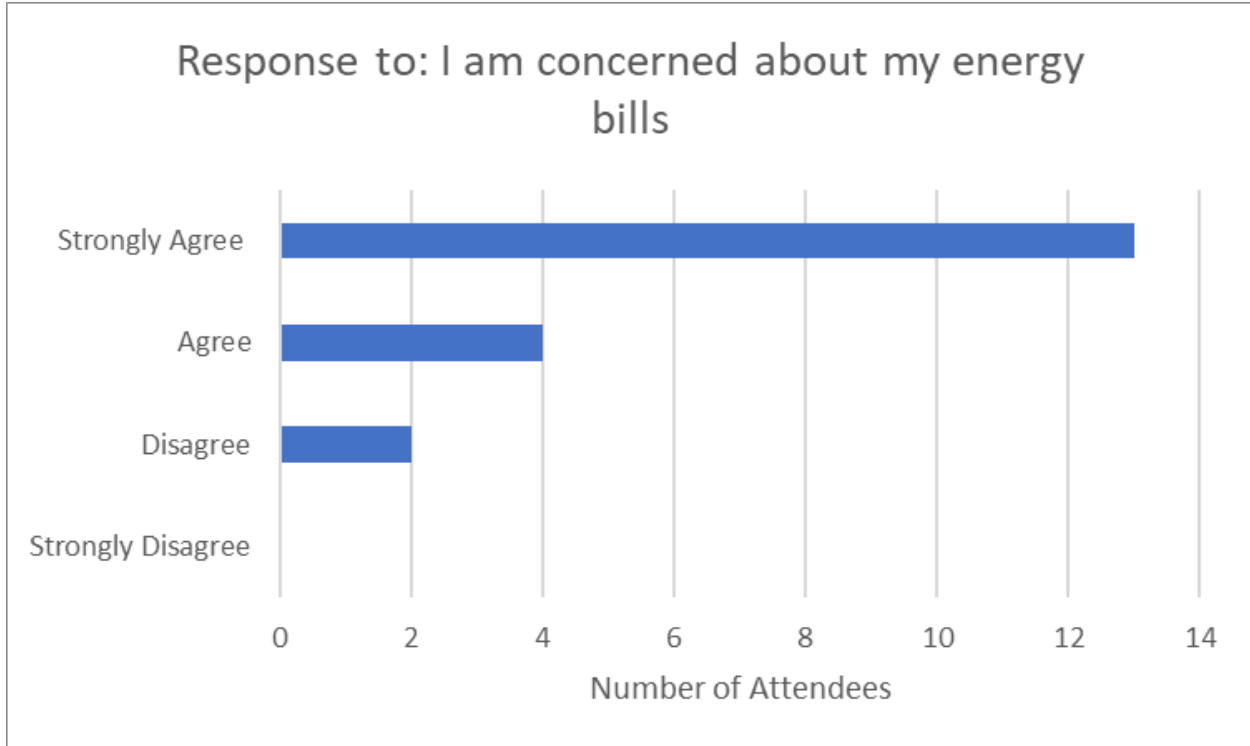
Professor Zoe Robinson & Dr Philip Catney Keele University

Simon Tagg, County Council Cabinet Member responsible for Climate Change

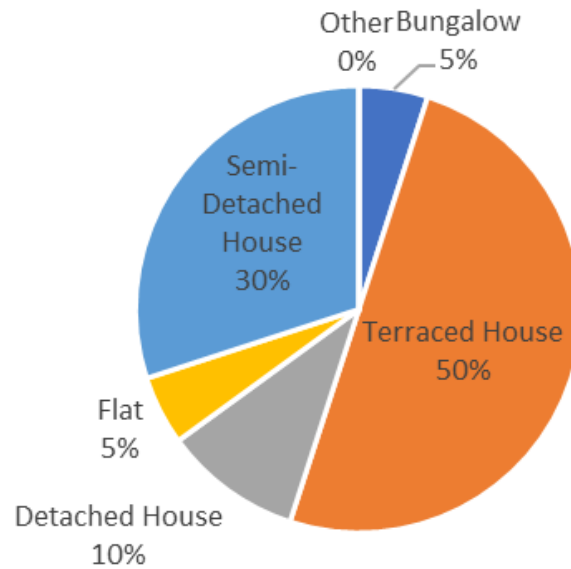


Appendix 3 pre-session questionnaire data:





Response to: What sort of property do you live in?



Response to: I believe the following institutions have a responsibility to support tackling energy issues in my home

