

The Big CO₂ Conversation

in association with 

CO₂ncerned, CO₂nfused or unCO₂nvinced about climate change? The Big CO₂nversation is a project to get people in the UK talking about what they think about climate change and what it means to them so that as a society we can come to more reasoned, informed and public-spirited decisions on climate change.

The Environment Council

The Environment Council (TEC) develops, promotes and delivers good stakeholder engagement on challenging and vital environmental issues to enable communities to achieve more sustainable solutions. We are a UK-based charity with 20 years' experience leading the design, delivery and evaluation of stakeholder and community engagement processes. In the 1990s, we pioneered stakeholder engagement, learning from our experience working with Shell on the decommissioning of Brent Spar. We developed the Principles of Authentic Engagement that have influenced stakeholder engagement and consultation practices in the private and public sectors since. In addition, we led the development of evaluation methods to review the effectiveness of engagement processes. We:

- work with a wide range of private and public sector partners across the UK on community and stakeholder engagement;
- continue to pioneer better ways to engage communities and stakeholders; and
- implement a highly regarded training, coaching and volunteer programme.

The Big CO₂nversation project

The Big CO₂nversation is a project to get people in the UK talking together about what they think about climate change and what it means to them. This project addresses a huge gap in how people are engaged in climate change issues, providing a means to deliberate, listen to others and influence decision-makers. The approach being taken to encourage participative engagement is managed and owned by the groups themselves and tests new ideas in public engagement to develop better practice. We will evaluate what impact this has to influence policy and change behaviour.

Increasing general awareness of climate change issues is not resulting in more pro-environmental actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This disparity between awareness and actions can be explained but not predicted by several behavioural change models. However, an overriding issue that is inhibiting behavioural change is the lack of action from government, business and media leaders to enable people to overcome the impediments to pro-environmental behaviour presented by existing infrastructure, social norms and regulations.

The Environment Council believes that a pluralist approach that engages and enables constructive dialogue with stakeholders strengthens democracy and can provide political impetus and systemic capacity for behavioural change to deal with climate change. Through the Big CO₂ Conversation we want to get people of all ages and parts of society thinking and talking about climate change and what it means to them. By sharing these views with each other and with business, government and media leaders we want to bring about significant social learning on climate change that enables people to be able to engage with policymakers and decision makers to deal with this 'wicked' issue.

What will motivate people to take part in this? Often we feel powerless to do anything about climate change and to influence decisions made by government, business and media leaders. The Big CO₂ Conversation is a way for people to develop their own views and to get those views heard by powerful decision-makers. As a personal incentive, every one who takes part will get a climate change profile with information about his or her climate change typology and details of where to get more advice or information. In addition, one group will receive a £10,000 prize for a charity, school or sports club of their choice.

Our vision for the project

To get people from all walks of life in the UK talking with their families, friends, work and school mates about climate change and sharing their views about what it means to them. We want every sort of person to get involved through, for example, company boards, PTAs, council cabinets, parent and toddler groups, chambers of commerce, cubs, scouts and guides, residents association, student tutorials, neighbourhood watch groups, Sunday schools, boxing clubs, literature groups and coffee mornings, or, at the temple, pub or Bingo. We'll encourage company bosses, local newspaper editors, council leaders and head teachers to lead by example and get involved too.

Objectives:

1. To get 50,000 people (in about 5,000 groups) involved across the whole of the UK, of all ages and from all parts of society
2. To find out and let people know what the British people think about climate change
3. To discuss with media, business, voluntary sector and government leaders what the findings mean for their sectors
4. To find out through follow-up evaluation what impact the conversations have had on people's decisions and daily habits

Impact:

- Bring about significant social learning on climate change that enables people collectively:
 - to come to more reasoned, informed and public-spirited decisions on climate change issues, and
 - to engage, influence and hold to account government, business and media leaders on climate change issues
- To improve understanding about the impact of deliberative engagement on changing behaviours to help inform public sector approaches to engagement on climate change decision-making

Our approach

To use the model of ‘connected conversations’ developed by the New Economics Foundation and TEC’s new (in development) ‘climate change profiles’. ‘Connected conversations’ enable people to organise and facilitate their own discussions. Our ‘climate change profiles’ are typologies of people based on beliefs and attitudes to climate change and drawn from existing knowledge on our attitudes and behaviours to environmental issues.

Between September and early December 2011 encourage people across the nation to gather together with friends, families, colleagues etc. Groups will have five questions (proposed below) to talk about and for each question there will be a set of possible responses based on the different climate profiles. For each of the questions they will discuss the various responses and select the one that most fits their individual views. They will feed back their responses through an on-line or postal survey. Each participant will receive a personal, computer-generated report on his/her climate change profile with suggestions about where to get more climate change information and advice.

1. How much impact do you have on climate change?
2. What do you think are the biggest climate change risks facing you and other people?
3. When people talk about a ‘low-carbon future’, what do you think this means?
4. What would you like a low-carbon future to be like?
5. What, if anything, should be done about climate change and who should do it?

(The survey will also ask a short number of questions about the conversation itself. These are still at the draft stage but will explore whether talking to other helped people to develop their own views.)

We will support participation by providing guidance on how to organise the conversations and use the profiles and survey. As an added incentive, one group selected randomly from all the groups that provide information about their discussions can win a £10,000 donation to a charity, school, or sports club of their choice.

Between December and January 2012 we will analyse findings from discussions and prepare a draft report in February 2012. In early March 2012 we will hold discussions with media, business, voluntary and government leaders. We will complete and disseminate a final version of the report by the end of March 2012.

Evaluation

We consider evaluation to be an essential part of the project, to understand participants' views about the process, explore more deeply some of the issues raised in the conversation and to investigate what impact the conversations have had on people's decisions and daily habits.

During April 2012 we will conduct a follow-up survey by email and post with participants including media, business, voluntary and government leaders. This will investigate whether they changed any of their views or habits or made decisions that were influenced either by what they discussed in their group decisions or because others in the group have changed their habits or made significant decisions.

Analyse, write up and report evaluation findings during June and July 2012.

Who's working on this

The project manager is the current TEC Chief Executive, Sian Ferguson and Sian will be supported by TEC's Engagement Manager, Eva Beresford and Project Officer, Erica Sutton.

Sian has extensive expertise and experience managing complex engagement and evaluation projects, including undertaking Comprehensive Area Assessments at the Audit Commission and the County Durham Sustainable Communities Inspection. Sian is on the Steering Group of the EU-funded PISCES project to engage stakeholders around the Celtic Sea to develop ecosystem approaches to marine management. Eva has managed a wide range of community engagement projects including 'Dry Run', a community engagement on flooding in Boroughbridge, North Yorkshire that used innovative techniques – mapping and live media – to develop a flood planning toolkit. Erica leads TEC's work with Shell UK to involve stakeholders in plans for decommissioning North Sea oil platforms.

We have a long-standing record of working with and supporting volunteers. We provide volunteers with vocational and work-based training and support and they make a huge contribution to our ability to deliver our charitable aims. The support of volunteers will be important for this project.

TEC staff and volunteers will develop the survey, resource packs, manage the promotion and dissemination and the project evaluation. TEC staff and expert associates will undertake the data analysis and report writing.

An advisory group will oversee and quality assure the project, including the development of the resource packs, survey analysis and report. Advisory group members each have a strong track record and expertise in developing and evaluating engagement processes to improve democracy and report production including:

- Matthew Lipson, Department for Energy and Climate Change
- Perry Walker, New Economics Foundation
- David Pottruff, Audit Commission
- Simon Burrall, Involve

A team of project supporters from a wide range of organisations across the UK has volunteered to help support the promotion of the project. These include the Centre for Sustainable Energy, Northern Rail, London

Sustainability Exchange, Loughborough University, The Futures Company, WWF, University of East Anglia, Chelgate Ltd, Carbon Leapfrog, IZWE and Groundwork UK.

Contact:

Sian Ferguson, Interim Chief Executive

sian@envcouncil.org.uk

0208 144 9840

07881 813 313