

Local Storytelling Exchange

The Sounding Board Citizens Panel

Exploring how future upgrades to the electricity grid can be made fair and inclusive for communities

Process Design and Summary Findings Report



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A Climate Guide Report for the Local Storytelling Exchange

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introduction

Funded by the European Climate Foundation, The Sounding Board was a deliberative forum made up of 45 residents from the East Coast of the UK, who met six times between April and October 2025. The Sounding Board is part of a wider, ongoing public engagement project, conceived and managed by the Local Storytelling Exchange and Sustainability First, which aims to understand what the public want and expect from engagement around forthcoming grid upgrades, and to work with grid operators to build this understanding into everyday business practice.

The full project team is detailed in the adjacent panel. Climate Guide was contracted to plan and deliver the deliberative forum, and this report provides specific details of the rationale, recruitment and design of the process, along with some high-level insights from it.

Since the panel meetings concluded, the Local Storytelling Exchange and Sustainability First have combined further analysis of the Sounding Board discussions, alongside the findings of an associated programme of Focus Groups and a series of locally-specific grid engagement projects, to develop a set of voluntary guidelines for grid operators.

Project Funder



Project Coordination

Local Storytelling Exchange

THIS IS WHAT THE GREEN TRANSITION LOOKS LIKE



Overall project management, synthesis of outcomes, and policy engagement.

Specialist subcontractors



Design and delivery of deliberative forum.



Recruitment of deliberative forum participants.



Design and delivery of focus groups.



scope of the process

Planned upgrades to the UK's electricity grid are on a scale not seen for many decades, coming at a time of increased public scrutiny of both major infrastructure projects, and utility providers themselves. The UK's Net Zero targets are under increasingly vocal challenge from high profile political actors, and global energy supplies are vulnerable to increased geopolitical tension. It is in this volatile context that the UK's Transmission Operators must deliver substantial upgrades to the grid in a challenging timetable.

The Sounding Board sessions were designed to help the participants consider the following question:

"How can we make sure that communities are properly and fairly included in future upgrades to the national electricity grid?"

The question was communicated clearly in the recruitment invitation materials.

Participants were made aware, and reminded throughout the process, that the scope of the process was limited to the question of making planned upgrades to the grid as **fair and inclusive** as possible within the boundaries of the grid delivery and management structures that currently exist, and that the project did not extend to wider issues that challenge existing legislation, such as privatised versus nationalised energy industry, national climate change policies and statutes, or international agreements and treaties

The project was designed to inform ongoing policy advisory work by Sustainability First and the Local Storytelling Exchange. Participants were therefore not asked to develop and vote on detailed recommendations; instead, the more quantitative data emerging has been used to inform early stage policy discussions, with longer term analysis of transcripts and discussion summaries underway as part of the wider policy influence work of the project leads.



deliberative principles

The Sounding Board was designed as a form of 'Deliberative Mini-Public' (DMP). DMPs are a specific form of 'deliberative democracy' which, in its broadest sense, is the theory and practice of making decisions through informed discussions between people, prioritising the role of informed discussion over simple voting.

DMPs have grown in popularity in recent years, with high-profile examples including the Irish abortion rights and equal marriage assemblies, and dozens of local and national 'Climate Assemblies' in the UK and elsewhere.

DMPs go by several names, including 'Citizens Jury' and 'Citizens Assembly'. Where Citizens Juries tend to be comprised of 12-20 people working on a very specific policy area, producing specific recommendations over 3-4 days, Citizens Assemblies tend to be larger (50+ people), meeting regularly over weeks or months. Finding consensus is usually prioritised, and voting on a set of recommendations at the end of the process is a common approach.

The 'consensus-based' approach is characteristic simply because much deliberative democracy practice draws on the theories of Jurgen Habermas, whose work focused on reaching consensus through genuine, rational dialogue.

By contrast, the Sounding Board was designed to be *agonistic*, an approach to democratic debate that accepts disagreement as healthy and productive, rather than something to be eliminated (drawing instead on the theories of Chantal Mouffe).

This approach was particularly appropriate given that grid infrastructure decisions involve genuinely competing values and interests that are unlikely to be easily resolved through more discussion.

Our process was therefore designed to reveal areas of irreducible disagreement *alongside* any common ground, providing policymakers with a realistic picture of the competing values they will need to navigate.

Regardless of whether the focus is to achieve consensus or to surface and explore conflict, all DMPs aim in some way to address a '*democratic deficit*'; the gap between public opinion and the actions of elected representatives and policy-makers. Deliberative processes can provide policy makers with detailed, reasoned insight into the views of a representative group of citizens, allowing them to make better decisions without falling prey to 'popular passions'.

The concept of '*preference formation*' is central to understanding why deliberative forums are so useful. Polls and surveys capture *raw* preferences from large numbers of people, and while they are undoubtedly useful insights on the views of the *majority*, the challenge levelled at such raw preference data is that the views expressed can be unstable, since they are often uninformed by context and detailed subject knowledge, and have not always been tested against counter-argument or other viewpoints.

By contrast, Deliberative Mini Publics such as the Sounding Board provide the *considered judgements* of a descriptively representative *minority* of the public, who have had the time to engage in reasoned, informed dialogue on a complex issue with no simple solution.

The legitimacy challenge for deliberative policy recommendations is that, while arguably more informed, and less 'raw' than the policy preferences expressed by large numbers of survey respondents, they are nonetheless drawn from a small minority of the public.

Recruiting a genuinely representative group of participants was therefore crucial to ensuring the reliability of outputs from this project. We worked with the Sortition Foundation, experts in this field, to achieve this.

"Deliberative processes can provide policy makers with detailed, reasoned insight into the views of a representative group of citizens, allowing them to make better decisions."

recruiting participants

Recruitment areas

Recruitment for the Sounding Board was subcontracted to The Sortition Foundation, a specialist organisation that promotes the use of stratified, random selection in public decision-making.

In order to recruit a panel of 45 members, 9,000 letters were sent to randomly selected addresses across 219 wards in 36 local authority areas up and down the east of the UK. While grid upgrades are planned for other parts of the UK, the east coast was chosen for this project as it represents the bulk of the more immediate planned works and has already been the site of some significant negative public response.

To ensure the Sounding Board was broadly representative of the east coast population in general, we selected a proportionally representative number of participants from Kent and Essex, East Anglia, the East of England, North East England, and Eastern Scotland.

We used publicly available information from the grid operators on planned new or upgraded pylon routes and substations.

Wards were included if new infrastructure is planned within a ward, or close to its border.

Target demographics

Approximately 110 people volunteered for the process on receipt of a letter.

We aimed for a representative group of 45 volunteers on the following characteristics:

- Age, ethnicity, sex, educational background, rural/urban. We aimed for the group to be representative of census breakdown for the target areas.
- Political Identity, based on the question 'which political party do you feel most closely represents your views'. We aimed to match vote share in 2024 general election for the recruitment areas.
- Support for Net Zero, based on the question 'how supportive are you of the Government's Net Zero targets?' We reviewed national polling on this question, and aimed for slight *over*-representation of those who *do not* support the target, since this is a minority view and alignment with national polling would have led to only 1 or 2 isolated individuals in a group of this size, and we wanted to make sure people felt confident to discuss these concerns.

The recruited panel results were:

- age - volunteers skewed older, therefore every volunteer under 35 was selected. Target almost achieved.
- ethnicity - area ~95% white, target achieved.
- sex - approx. 50:50, target achieved.
- rural/urban - area 70% rural, target achieved.
- educational background - very few 'no qual' volunteers, thus the final group was more highly qualified than the population of the target areas. Target not achieved.
- political views – target achieved.
- Net Zero support – target achieved.



session overview

The process was structured into three blocks of two meetings each, totalling approximately 14 hours of meeting time.

Spring Block

Summer Block

Autumn Block

MEETING 1 (23 April)

- Welcome and orientation
- Expert speakers and Q&A on:
 - How the grid works, and who manages it
 - Energy security and Climate Change as drivers for grid upgrades

MEETING 2 (30 April)

- Expert speaker and Q&A on grid regulation
- Exploration of grid operators' current engagement approaches
- Group work and plenary polling to choose focus areas for future sessions

MEETING 4 (2 July)

- Circulating group discussions on socialised costs of infrastructure
- Q-Sort ranking of issues to identify areas of agreement and diverse perspectives

MEETING 3 (25 June)

- Circulating group discussions on focus areas: consultation preferences, community benefit, household compensation.
- Case studies on existing community grid upgrades

MEETING 5 (24 Sept)

- Revealing Q-Sort results to panel
- Small group work exploring the *opposing* priorities that emerged from Q-Sort

MEETING 6 (1 Oct)

- Discussion on the *consensus* priorities from Q-Sort
- Final reflection on how the panel has changed group understanding of the complex issue under consideration

session detail

Setting the scene

In the first block, participants heard from three expert speakers:



Dr Avinash Aithal

Head of Open Networks, Energy Networks Association

- Meeting 1: How the UK electricity grid is structured
- Meeting 2: How the UK electricity grid is regulated



Adam Bell

Director of Policy, Stonehaven

- Meeting 1: Energy Security as a driver for upgrading the UK's electricity grid



Dr Sheridan Few

Lecturer in Urban Energy Systems, Leeds University

- Meeting 1: Climate Change as a driver for upgrading the UK's electricity grid

Participants broke into small groups to question the expert speakers. All questions were also answered in detail in a follow-up briefing sent to participants, which included responses from the panellists to any questions not answered on the day due to time limitations.

Setting priority discussion areas

By designing only the first two sessions in detail at the outset, we were able to focus the remaining sessions on the priority areas that the participants identified as part of early discussion sessions. These were:

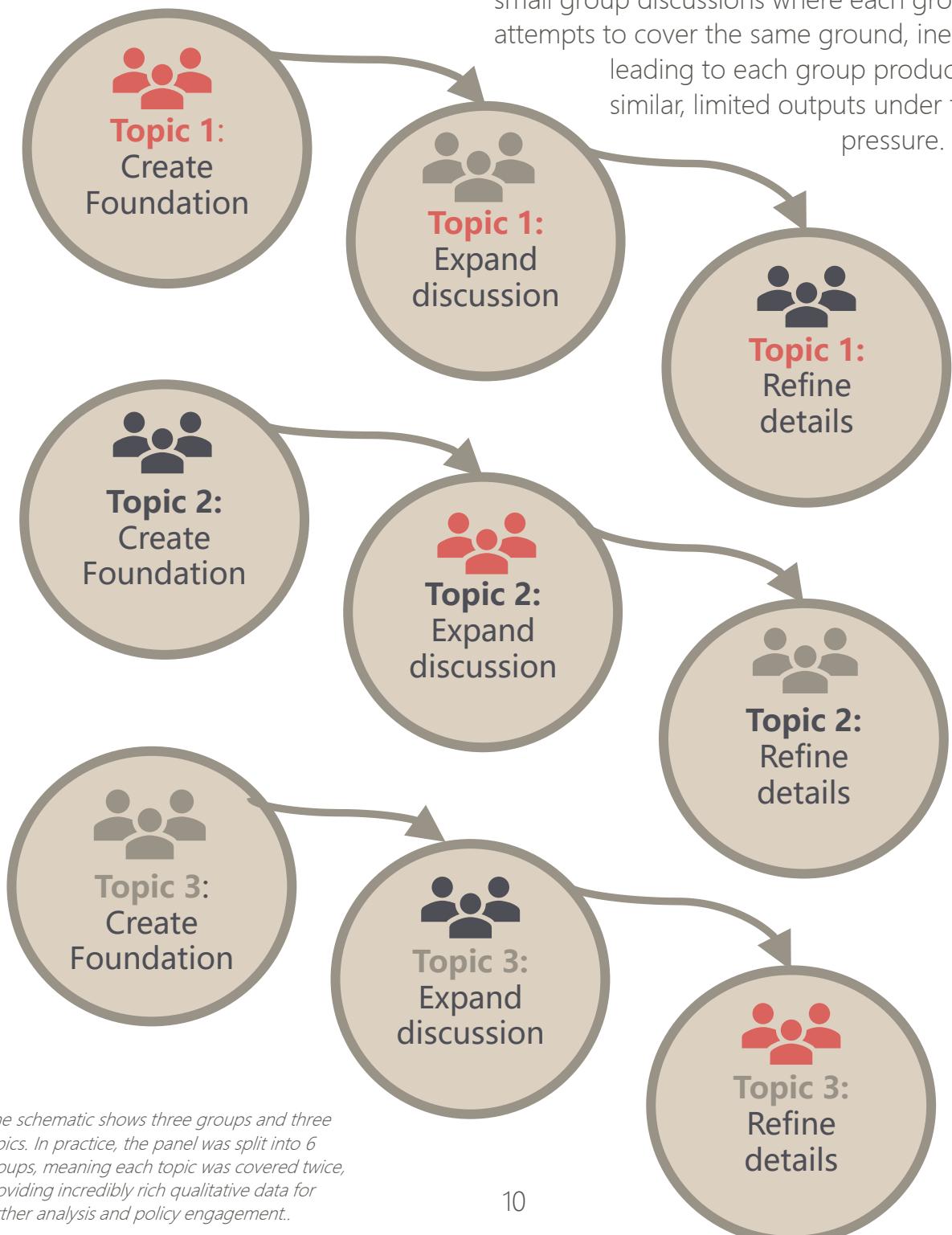
- Community engagement and consultation best practice
- Community benefit structures and amounts and eligibility
- Household-level compensatory mechanisms, amounts and eligibility

Although the local environmental and landscape impacts of proposed grid works were also discussed in Meeting 2, participants chose to take forward principles-based discussions of the three areas above, noting that the focus of the overall process on 'fairness' and 'inclusion' for communities was best suited to discussing how they would wish to be engaged with, and how any compensatory mechanisms should work. Environmental and landscape issues did arise organically during discussions, but were not a prioritised theme.

Qualitative data - topic discussion structure

Although the meetings covered around 14 hours, in total we facilitated around 40 hours of group discussion, largely through deployment of the 'World Café' 'circulating discussion technique. In this approach, topics are assigned to a facilitated group to lead that topic and build the foundation. In round 2, a new group considers that foundational work, and expands on it. In round 3, a final group considers the work and adds any refinements or challenges. This method allowed us to 'stretch' the discussion time, ensuring detailed consideration of the topics and with all participants having the opportunity to engage in depth. This contrasts with the use of parallel

small group discussions where each group attempts to cover the same ground, inevitably leading to each group producing similar, limited outputs under time pressure.



*the schematic shows three groups and three topics. In practice, the panel was split into 6 groups, meaning each topic was covered twice, providing incredibly rich qualitative data for further analysis and policy engagement.

Quantitative data – Q-Sort Methodology

Around two-thirds of the way through the process we deployed a Q-Sort process, to identify and describe the different subjective viewpoints that were emerging across the panel.

An introduction to Q-Sort Methodology

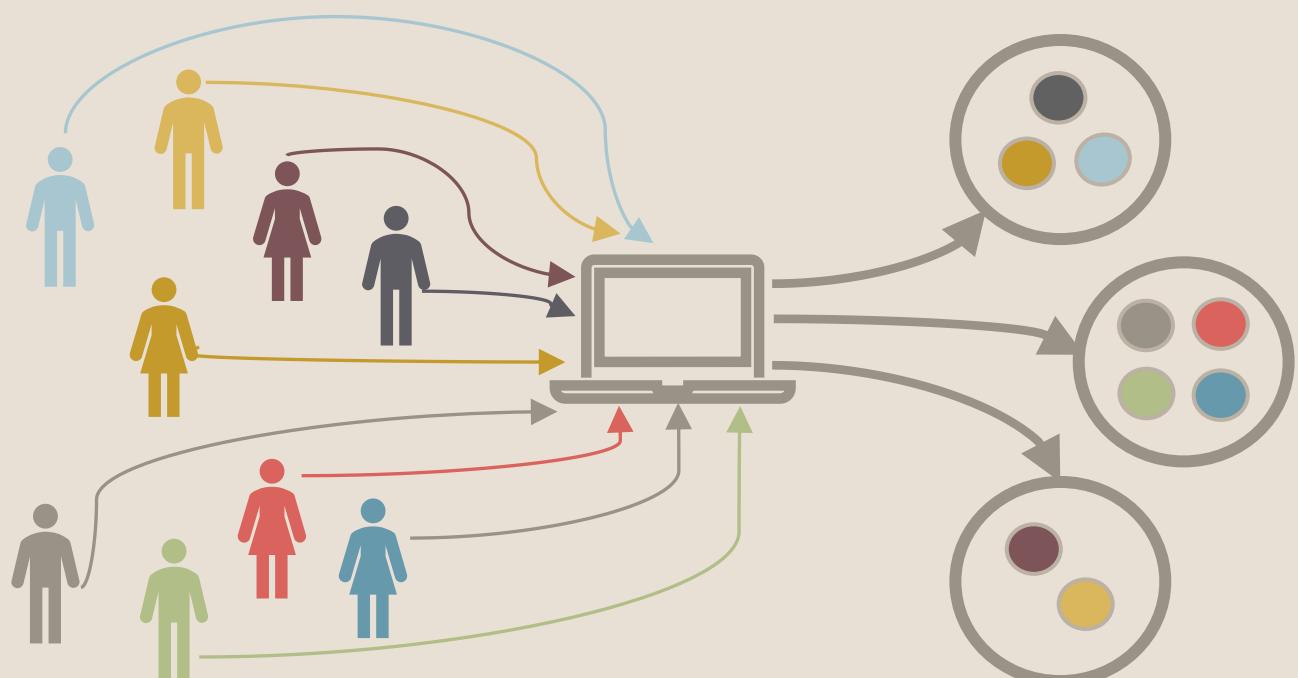
Developed in the 1930's, Q-Sort methodology helps to bring quantitative rigour to qualitative data. The process 'inverts' typical statistical methods of factor analysis that are used when analysing survey data, instead identifying participants that share perspectives, or 'subjectivity clusters'.

Participants are given a series of statements to rank. Unlike surveys, where participants can strongly agree/disagree with all statements, Q-Sort forces participants to rank statements within a defined grid, which results in relative rankings of

statements against each other, rather than absolute rankings of each statement individually. Effectively, where surveys ask "how much do you agree or disagree?", Q-Sorts ask "what matters most to you?"

People with similar subjective viewpoints on the issue will sort statements in similar patterns. The process is usually done with 30-60 participants and a set of 25 to 50 statements, which gives enough statistical power to analyse the results.

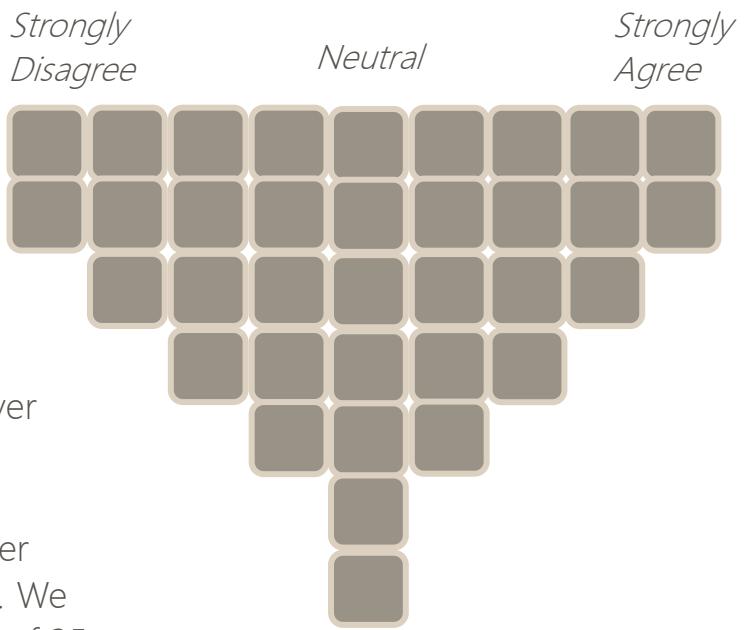
Crucially, a Q-Sort process is never carried out 'cold'; participants must have good knowledge of the topic to make informed rankings. Our participants had already collectively engaged in around 20 hours of discussion, as well as hearing from expert speakers, when they completed the Q-Sort.





The Sounding Board Q-Sort

A set of Q-Sort statements is developed from a much wider 'concourse' of statements - several hundred items that are relevant to the topic at hand.



We developed our concourse of over 400 statements from transcripts of group discussions and analysis of relevant policy documents and wider public discourse on grid expansion. We reduced these thematically to a set of 35 items for the Q-Sort (see pages 13-14 for the full set), which participants had to fit to the grid shown above. Most participants completed the process online. Paper copies were provided in advance to those who preferred that option.

Forty participants completed the Q-Sort during the fourth meeting.

Q-Sort Statement list

The full Q-Sort is provided below and overleaf. We analysed the Q-Sorts over the summer, and presented the results to the participants for detailed group discussion in the autumn meetings.

1. All new grid infrastructure should be designed to provide physical improvements for local communities wherever possible. Since construction work is already happening, features like cycle paths and wildlife corridors can be added at little extra cost. These benefits should be provided automatically, separate from any community fund.
2. Community consultation is just a tick-box exercise that doesn't really influence the final decision.
3. Communities should receive government funding to hire independent technical advisors during planning and construction phases, so they can better understand and respond to technical information.
4. There is no amount of compensation or community benefit that can make new grid infrastructure acceptable.
5. We need more renewable energy because climate change is such an urgent threat. Local concerns about the associated power lines must be secondary to this.
6. The Government should offer an 'express purchase' scheme to allow people to easily sell their houses to the government for a fair market price, if proposals for new grid infrastructure have reduced its value.
7. The UK's energy security situation is vulnerable, and so we must generate more renewable energy on the land and seas that we control. New power lines are a necessary part of that, which local areas must accept for the national good.
8. Anyone directly affected by infrastructure should be considered part of the community, regardless of administrative boundaries.
9. It's important that the UK sets a global example by increasing the amount of energy that comes from renewable sources. New grid infrastructure is a necessary part of this.
10. Household compensation payments should be paid in a lump sum up front instead of being spread out over many years.
11. The best way to manage community benefit funds is to set up new charitable trusts owned and run by the community. These can represent any area that is affected.
12. The cheapest route should always be chosen to keep energy bills down for everyone.
13. The cost of compensating households and making community benefit payments in areas with new grid infrastructure should be paid by energy companies, not electricity consumers.
14. The consultation process should continue even after construction begins to address ongoing concerns.
15. Developers should provide evidence about what communities said and how they responded. This should show how they considered the feedback, how they tried to incorporate it, and give a clear explanation if community feedback could not be acted upon.
16. There should be regulations to ensure that existing government funding (for services like libraries, youth clubs, or road repairs) cannot be withdrawn when community benefit money is awarded for new grid infrastructure. Community benefit money should only fund new projects.

17. Government knows they will not get grid upgrades approved if they rely on public support. Community benefits are just bribes to make people accept unwanted development.
18. Developers should have to follow national guidelines to produce clear cost and impact calculations that communities can understand, with no important details hidden in complex technical reports.
19. Grid expansion would be more acceptable if the whole energy transmission system were truly nationalised.
20. Reduction in individual property values is the most unfair impact when new grid infrastructure is built.
21. It's not right to just give community benefit funds to parishes that the new power lines physically run through - it has to fairly be shared with any community that can see them.
22. Where they exist, Parish Councils are the right organisations to manage any community benefit money. They represent established boundaries and anyone can put themselves forward for election if they want to.
23. Compensation boundaries should be drawn simply by distance, even if this means some unfairness, because it's simpler and cheaper overall to do this.
24. Community part-ownership of local grids is too complicated for some smaller or less capable communities to deal with. An ownership stake should be held on behalf of all affected communities by a national energy trust.
25. Compensating for temporary construction disruption when new grid infrastructure is built would set a dangerous precedent for all infrastructure projects
26. Undergrounding should only be used in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks.
27. People have a right to compensation if infrastructure spoils their view, even if they don't legally own that view
28. There should be targets for how many households developers must hear from before they can say consultation is complete, and consultation should continue until a certain percentage of affected households have had the opportunity to respond
29. Rural areas will host most new grid infrastructure, but most power demand is elsewhere. Since rural areas have limited services, they should be properly compensated through long-term support for services like subsidised bus routes, banking hubs, and broadband.
30. Communities should always be offered the chance to own part of the grid infrastructure so they benefit from a long term income stream from it.
31. Construction phase disruption can last years and includes traffic, dust, and vibration. Anyone affected by this deserves specific compensation that covers the period of construction.
32. The main purpose of consultation is to help communities understand why projects are necessary, not to change them
33. Everyone who uses electricity should contribute to the cost of community benefits through their energy bills, because those communities are hosting it on behalf of everyone.
34. Long-term compensation should be reserved for people who can demonstrate that their enjoyment of their property is reduced (e.g. they no longer have uninterrupted views). Simply compensating people who live within a certain radius of the new infrastructure, but who cannot see it, is unfair.
35. A £250 cash payment, payable every year for 10 years to any home within 500m of new grid infrastructure, is adequate compensation for individual households.

Q-Sort results

Distinguishing, consensus, and extreme statements

The data from each Q-Sort was analysed through a process called Factor Analysis. Each 'Factor' that emerges from the analysis represents a distinct pattern of arranging the statement items in the Q-Sort. Participants who have statistically similar arrangements of items will 'load' onto the same factor.

By producing a 'composite factor' of all statements that load similarly, and examining the content, meaning and placement of the items, researchers can describe the distinct viewpoint or topic that it represents, and give that a name.

The factor structures are driven by specific 'distinguishing statements', those items that show statistically significant differences in how they are sorted across the different factors (or 'viewpoints') that emerged from the analysis.

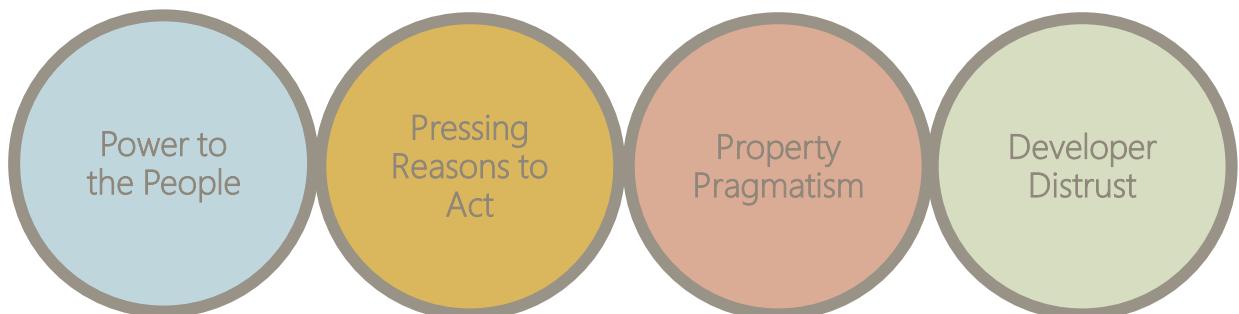
Distinguishing statements are usually, but not always, the 'extreme statements' (those that are placed in the strongest agreement and disagreement positions). Occasionally though, statements are placed in the extreme positions by almost all participants, which are examples of 'extreme consensus' (everyone feels strongly about that item, in the same direction).

Other consensus items also exist, often sitting in the middle of the distribution for everyone. Knowing that these are items that most people feel neutral about is useful policy knowledge.

The Sounding Board Results

Analysis of the Q-Sorts resulted in four largely uncorrelated factors, representing distinct perspectives on what makes grid upgrades "fair and inclusive for communities". This revealed fundamentally different value frameworks or priorities that underpin how our participants view this topic, which plausibly also exist in the wider population, given the representative approach to recruitment of the panel.

We examined the content of the distinguishing statements and the overall distribution of statements in each factor, using these to define each group with a name. Each factor is discussed in more detail on the following pages.



Factor 1 – Power to the People (11 members)

This factor was characterised by distinguishing statements that reflected a desire to see public or local ownership of grid infrastructure. This group tended to place statements about household and individual compensation in a neutral position, suggesting that while they do not outright object to the idea of household compensation, it is much less important to them than community-scale ownership and compensation mechanisms.

This group disagreed with the statement that there is no level of compensation for communities that would be adequate, suggesting that compromise with developers is possible. This group also tended to disagree with the statements prioritised by the next group ('Pressing Reasons to Act').

Key distinguishing statements that this group most strongly agreed with are:

"Communities should always be offered the chance to own part of the grid infrastructure"

"The cost of compensating households and making community benefit payments should be paid by energy companies, not electricity consumers"

"Grid expansion would be more acceptable if the whole energy transmission system were truly nationalised"

Factor 2 – Pressing Reasons to Act (10 members)

This factor stood out for the abstract, principles-based nature of its distinguishing statements. Rather than strongly agreeing with practical actions that would make grid upgrades fairer, members of this group instead reserved their strongest agreement for *reasons* to act, seemingly willing to accept that what is fair to local communities is ultimately subservient to national and global issues such as climate change and energy security. This group also tended to disagree with statements that stressed the importance of compensation for people whose property is devalued by grid upgrades, and strongly disagree with the idea that loss of views should be compensated at the individual household level. Notably, those are the items that are held to be *most* important by the next group (Property Pragmatists), suggesting strong values-based differences between these groups.

Key distinguishing statements that this group most strongly agreed with are:

"The UK's energy security situation is vulnerable and so we must generate more renewable energy. New power lines are a necessary part of that"

"We need more renewable energy because climate change is such an urgent threat. Local concerns about associated power lines are secondary"

"It's important that the UK sets a global example in increasing the amount of renewable energy. New power lines are a necessary part of that."

Factor 3 – Property Pragmatism (12 members)

This factor was the strongest in terms of the number and coherence of its distinguishing statements, all of which focused on the rights of householders to receive compensation in relation to devaluation or loss of enjoyment of their personal property. This group do not agree with the statement suggesting that there is no amount of compensation that would be adequate for householders, hence the label 'property pragmatists'.

This was the only factor where the statement '*grid expansion would be more acceptable if the electricity grid were truly nationalised*' was placed negatively, setting this group apart in being less strongly concerned about the lack of public control of the grid than members of the other factors.

Key distinguishing statements that this group most strongly agreed with are :

"People have a right to compensation if infrastructure spoils their view, even if they don't legally own that view."

"Government should offer an 'express purchase scheme' to allow people to quickly sell homes to the government where their value is reduced by grid infrastructure"

"Long-term compensation should be reserved for people who can demonstrate that enjoyment of their property is reduced"

"Reduction in individual property values is the most unfair impact when new grid infrastructure is built."

Factor 4 – Developer Distrust (4 members)

This factor was characterised by statements that force grid developers to act in certain ways, (suggesting distrust of developers to 'do the right thing' otherwise), as well as more hardline feelings that there is no way to make grid upgrades fair, and that it is simply not possible to adequately compensate communities or households. Despite the small number of members with a primary loading on the factor, note that many members of other factors also had secondary loadings here.

"Government knows they will not get grid upgrades approved if they rely on public support. Community benefit payments are bribes to make people accept it"

"Developers should provide evidence about what communities said and how they responded, and explain why if they couldn't change things"

"There should be regulations to ensure existing funding (libraries, youth clubs etc) cannot be withdrawn when community benefit money is awarded."

"There is no amount of compensation or community benefit that can make new grid infrastructure acceptable."

Consensus Disagreement

Three statements were consistently placed in the -2 to -4 position on the sorting grid, indicating broadly shared *disagreement* with the statement. Regardless of the factor that people loaded onto in the wider Q-Sort, disagreement with these three statements was unanimous.

The most consistently extreme placement was reserved for the item on £250 compensation per annum for affected households. This is current government guidance, and was noted in several of the discussion groups as derisory or insulting.

Despite the fact that there were strong concerns expressed in discussions about the profit-making structures of the transmission operators, and many participants recognised the link between investment and return for TOs, participants strongly disagreed with the idea that the cheapest route should always be chosen.

Finally, the idea that only protected landscapes should be guaranteed undergrounding options was not popular; subsequent discussions suggested that these areas tend to be more affluent, and that this would concentrate impacts in already deprived areas.

Consensus Agreement

Two statements were overwhelmingly placed in the +1 to +4 position on the sorting grid; regardless of the Factor that people loaded onto support for these two statements was widespread.

Again, there is some inherent contradiction here; though participants were aware of the regulated profit-making structures of the grid companies and subsequent discussions suggested that many felt it unlikely that compensation *could* be structured so that it came directly from the companies' profits, this approach was still widely regarded as unfair.

That there should be an enforced 'evidence trail' of how community feedback is used was also supported across the board.

"A £250 cash payment, every year for 10 years, to any home within 500m of new grid infrastructure, is adequate compensation for individual households"

"The cheapest route should always be chosen, to keep energy bills down for everyone."

"Undergrounding should only be used in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks"



"The cost of compensating households and making community benefit payments in areas with new grid infrastructure should be paid by energy companies, not electricity consumers."

"Developers should provide evidence about what communities said and how they responded. This should show how they considered the feedback, how they tried to incorporate it, and give a clear explanation if community feedback could not be acted upon."



final deliberations

The final two sessions of the Sounding Board were focused on exploring the subjectivity clusters that emerged from the Q-Sort process.

The first half of the penultimate meeting saw the participants organised into small groups of people that shared the same Q-Sort factors – effectively exploring with a group of ‘like-minded’ people why they all prioritised similar statements. Facilitators spent time probing the underlying sentiments that led to the shared arrangement of Q-Sorts.

After this, facilitators moved to other groups, whose members did not share the same viewpoint. Their task was to represent the position of their previous group, and ask the participants who did not share that factor to reflect on it and consider common ground.

The process revealed that the members of the ‘Pressing Reasons to Act’ group had the least in common with the other three groups. The sessions in some cases were quite heated, and reflect differing values

in wider society that policy makers will need to navigate. For example, where the ‘Property Pragmatism’ groups largely focused on detailed mechanisms to ensure compensation is swift, commensurate, well managed and targeted at people who could demonstrate genuine loss of value or enjoyment of property, the Pressing Reasons to Act group saw this as individualistic, likely to be ultimately captured by the loudest voices, and potentially unfair. They felt compensation, if any, should be aimed at community scale. More broadly, where members of this group were motivated by the idea that the UK has not done enough on climate change, for other groups this was a poor reason for accepting substantial local impacts.

Separately, the Power to the People group talked about the need to renationalise the grid, drawing analogies with failing water companies being taken back into public ownership, but members of other groups saw this as unrealistic, or (in the case of Property Pragmatists) even unnecessary.



reflections

The most prominent theme emerging from the Sounding Board was that, at present, there is widespread distrust of developers and authorities. Even after significant expert input, participants repeatedly asserted that developers are primarily motivated by profit and are unlikely to act in the best interests of communities without strong regulation. Where community benefit funds were discussed, the concern that funds would be appropriated to replace local authority funds that ought to be provided anyway, was regularly reiterated. As for current approaches to consultation, these attracted great scepticism as largely performative, box-ticking exercises.

Compensation and benefits are contested

Initial reflections on the discussions show that there was a mix of opinion on appropriate levels of compensation and benefit that communities and/or householders should receive for hosting new infrastructure. The differences in opinion on the topic of compensation are underpinned by competing sets of values around what 'fairness' means.

For some it is a pragmatic equation of property rights and quantifiable loss. For others, it registers as a more abstract balancing act, with compensation acting as a recognition of the role of certain local communities hosting infrastructure for the national good. For others, it is more abstract and global still; a belief that the UK as a whole must act on a global 'greater good' imperative. These values-based differences are undoubtedly reflected across society as a whole: there will be no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to compensatory mechanisms.

However, despite the clearly different priorities (with some participants favouring household level rather than community level compensation), these differences are not always in outright opposition. There was little evidence in the discussion that those who favour, for example, household level compensation would fundamentally object to community benefits, and vice versa. Though some members of the 'Pressing Reasons to Act' grouping objected to the idea of compensation or benefits in general (citing wider imperatives), this was not a widely held view.

Public ownership is a sticky issue

A not insignificant proportion of participants want to see greater public and community ownership of grid assets, reflected directly in one of the factors revealed via Q-Sort, and in spite of reminders that the process scope did not cover utility nationalisation. This reflects not a naïve belief that communities can manage substantial and complex assets directly, but that partnership working is greatly needed, alongside a frustration that developers consistently overlook local knowledge and capacity in their work.

People will enthusiastically engage with complex problems

In this context of distrust and pessimism, the positive participant feedback received at the end of the Sounding Board sessions is encouraging. People enjoyed the process itself and valued hearing those other perspectives (indeed, for some people, the perspectives of other participants, rather than the expert input, was the greater learning experience). Many referred to the learning and education benefit of the process, and how it would help them talk with others about this issue.

Participants clearly understand the complexity and are hungry for information and genuine engagement. They recognise there are trade-offs and, in a 'done well' scenario, many of them would support grid upgrades.

But what does 'done well' look like in this context, accounting for those different values and priorities?

Grid engagement 'done well'

Frustrations we regularly expressed about being 'kept in the dark', or 'piecemeal' information, on complex websites that are hard to navigate. People want to see the big picture; they want to know how their local project fits the national plan, they want to understand the policy drivers, and they want all phases of the work laid out at the start.

Most people want to know that their area and residents will be compensated in some way. This needs to feel commensurate with the change, and, at the very least, leaves no-one worse off than they would otherwise have been.

Better still, development should leave places better than they found them. Right now, there is little trust that this can be a reality, because nobody can see evidence of places where this has happened. The ongoing work of the Local Storytelling Exchange and Sustainability First, within which this process sits, will be crucial here; it will take evidence from pioneer places and enlightened developers to show that this can be a reality.





climateguide

About Climate Guide

Climate Guide is a consultancy providing research services, training delivery, and strategic support to local government (from Parish to Unitary scale), academia and third sector organisations in the UK.

Services include quantitative and qualitative research around climate attitudes, helping organisations to better target climate communications, community outreach, design and delivery of public consultation support. We also specialise in design and delivery of in-depth deliberative processes, and an ongoing programme of climate change awareness training (including accredited Carbon Literacy training, and specialist courses on Planning and Climate Communications).