

Energy Biographies in Ely and Caerau

The Energy Biographies research project based at Cardiff University has been working in four communities across the UK to explore everyday energy use in the context of people's previous life experiences, current routines and anticipated futures. You can find out more about the project at www.energybiographies.org

As part of the project, 16 residents of Ely and Caerau took part in an initial interview and 5 were followed up for two further interviews and photograph activities over the course of a year. This document highlights some of the comments from residents about life in Ely and Caerau as well as their views on Futurespace and the planned Solar Photovoltaic Panels (PV) scheme. All those we interviewed lived in houses where there had been an expressed interest in having Solar PV under the proposed scheme (although not all houses were deemed suitable). We have changed names for anonymity.

Living in Ely and Caerau

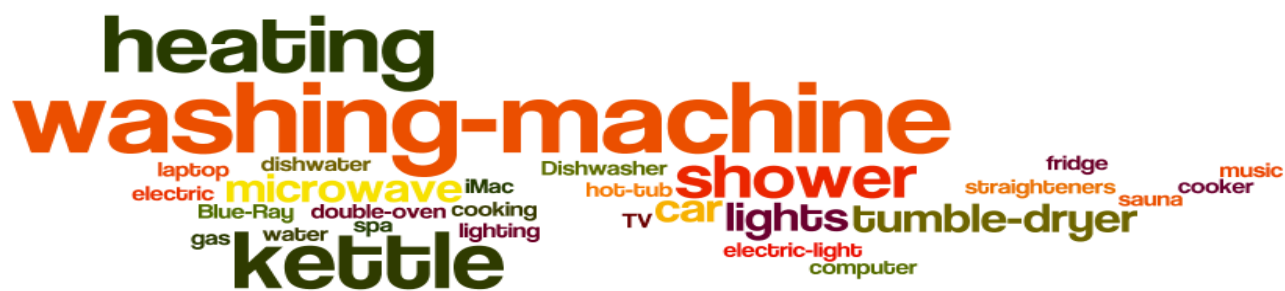
People spoke about living in the area for a number of reasons, including being close to family members and having grown up there. Others chose to move to the area because of their involvement in community work there, or because it was convenient in terms of transport links and amenities. Several people commented on the negative reputation of the area, associated with crime and deprivation, and felt this was the overriding perception of those who lived outside of the ward. However, many residents commented on the positive elements of living there:

I've lived here 11 years, the neighbours are fantastic ... And so you know there's a park there, the air is nice, I can smell the wild garlic on a morning there's lots of shops, it's easy to the motorway, its two miles into town, the bus service is amazing, its every five minutes there's a bus. (Jack)

Many participants also pointed out the volume and breadth of community groups active in the area, ranging from youth clubs to allotment schemes, bicycle, church and support groups. As such, Ely and Caerau is seen as an active, supportive and vibrant place by many residents— which appears to be a key reason why people stay in the area.

Energy use in Ely and Caerau

Financial issues to do with energy were remarked upon by many interviewees as an area of concern, either for themselves or others in the area. For example, people struggling with paying their energy bills or finding the money to put into their energy meters was raised as a key point by several participants. In the first interview, everyone was asked what they considered to be essential energy use. Whilst many of the things mentioned by Ely and Caerau residents were all the project case sites (e.g. washing machines) the computer seemed to be less of a priority in this area. That being said, a number of participants felt they had a large number of 'gadgets' and could be characterised as being 'large consumers'.



Communication about the Solar PV scheme

In the first interview, all residents were asked how they found out about the proposed scheme. People most frequently mentioned the free local newsletter 'Ely Grapevine'

Ely Grapevine is a free local newsletter that gets put through the door and I was reading through it and I saw the info on solar panels and it said it aids the community because they get the money instead of yourselves and we were quite interested because we are quite high consumers ... we usually read the community newsletters but that's the first, as soon as the advert was in I was telephoning or emailed to enquire about it. (Vicky)

Other ways people heard about the scheme included the Ely Festival, the ACE website, and via church leaflets and noticeboards. Some also mentioned finding out due to their involvement with a range of other community groups. Once they had heard about the scheme, even if they were not eligible for panels themselves, people helped to communicate information to others.

You know, it's not something that I would say, 'Well look, I'm not thinking about it so you know, I'm not going to make suggestions to other people. I did quite recently meet new people ... and we just happened to be in conversation about community spirits and he was saying how good they were in their area or whatever and I said, 'Oh yeah, part of this project now is to bring the project into this area bla-bla-bla' and that was it. This fella wanted to know more about the solar panels and whatever so I just signposted him to Communities First and said, 'You speak to them' so you know I am sort of blowing the bugle if you like for them saying 'look into it!' (Christine)

Motivations for involvement in the solar PV scheme

Given the importance of community and issues related to energy affordability, it is not surprising that a key reason people mentioned they wanted to be involved in the scheme was the opportunity to get 'free' electricity. Indeed, for some there was the underlying desire that the scheme should be much wider than targeting homeowners; many felt that those within social housing and the rental sector need support and help to address fuel poverty:

So if it keeps anyone's bills down and, you know...because maybe you have got a council tenant who is struggling with the heating bills as well, if it helps that then it helps right the way along the line doesn't it? (Pat)

Environmental concerns were often secondary, but rose in importance over time for some people. A key positive associated with the scheme was the possibility of raising funds and revenue to support other community endeavours:

I wasn't sure how it was going to work and how the feedback would actually work, I mean if it could work that it would then provide some extra revenue to sort of keep services going or for additional services within the community then that would be good (Jennifer)

I know the money...the income from the feed-in tariff was being used for maintenance and insurance for the project...any sort of excess money will be reinvested back into the area, they were going to do other energy saving things...and they were obviously going to be able to use the money for community events as well; useful. So it would have been good... (Colin)

Our research suggests that there appears to be support for schemes that benefit the wider community, even if the benefits to individuals or households are not particularly large.

Perceptions of the Futurespace scheme for solar PV

As mentioned, many people were very positive about the proposed scheme, seeing advantages for both the individual householder and the community. Some saw the potential of the scheme as a possible avenue for addressing fuel poverty in the area, which was seen as a significant issue.

I thought oh I just thought it was a wonderful idea even though I couldn't have it myself and I thought hmm this is a project that would benefit people who really need help with their heating bills (Caroline)

I thought it was a good idea, probably more about fuel poverty, I think that's more my concern than environment. So it was more about people who were struggling and they can't afford electric and gas ... I mean the environmental reasons are important but they are probably secondary (Kelly)

However, some people felt that there was initial suspicion towards the scheme and scepticism about the idea that they would get something for nothing. Community workers made efforts to provide more information about the scheme to reassure people who had concerns.

Well a major question, the most popular question is how are they doing this - we don't get nothing for nothing? and when I explain to them about the panels are being funded by European Funding if they still get it and if the feed-in tariff being used to for the maintenance, insurance that's how they can work it and they were quite 'ooh that sounds good then!' And once they know that I think people are quite eager to give it a go so they benefit from it and the community benefits from it as well so it's quite promising then. (Colin)

The scheme was also seen as beneficial for the Communities First organisation, which would allow them to address some of their targets for the area.

I think it's in terms of sort of Communities First trying to meet its targets I haven't come across a better scheme for them to be able to sort of, they've got some ridiculously tough target to meet about employment and trying to reduce poverty and this is I think it's one of the few things that goes some way to ticking all of the boxes sort of employing local people (Tom)

This included employing local people and creating community investment.

The attractive thing about it was the nature of it being guaranteed for 25 years; you ... could employ two or three staff for 25 years and that is your sustainable organisation' That is a dream scenario for any social enterprise or community organisation. Once you've got those staff in place they can fund raise, they can, but you've got that basis and it makes it sustainable. So that was obviously really attractive but then, of course, as soon as you start looking at the project in any detail you think 'Hold on a second, not only does it tick that box, but you're starting to knock money off people's electricity bills in an area where they are struggling with fuel poverty'... and then you start thinking, 'Now hold on, if we are going to be installing solar panels, what about training local people, what about employing local people?' and you start thinking, 'This could be absolutely a dream project'. (Steve)

In addition to the benefits outlined above, the scheme was also seen as a potential way of making a contribution to changing the area's negative reputation:

I think it will bring us forward as a community because Ely and Caerau have got a terrible reputation you know ... I think it'll put us on the map you know because I don't know of any other area who's doing this and wanting to pour the money back in the community so I think it can only be a good thing, good publicity. (Sally)

Feed-in-tariff changes

During the course of Energy Biographies' research involvement with Futurespace, the UK Government made changes to the feed-in-tariff (FiT) meaning that the scheme they had anticipated was no longer viable.

Well it just seems quite daft really, they come up with these schemes etcetera, get people interested, get them involved and then suddenly that's it or we've changed the tariff or we're not sure we're going to be able to go ahead and in the meantime I've been approached by another company that were doing solar panels and then it was but like well it's all under review and we're not sure whether we're going to be going ahead with it. So you've given the matter some thought, decided you're going to go with it and then suddenly 'right'. So it's frustrating. (Jennifer)

Whilst there was some frustration and confusion over what precisely was happening with the scheme in light of these changes, with some participants implying that they wish they had been kept better informed (a comment made about other aspects of the scheme beyond the FiT), others were aware of the efforts of Futurespace, ACE and Communities First to keep the scheme going:

And they were saying about the project and I thought...it was a wonderful idea even though I couldn't have it myself and I thought this is a project that would benefit people who really need help with their heating bills...but it's all waiting now to see what's going to happen so, but they've lobbied Ministers and that so hopefully they might let our little scheme go ahead (Caroline).

Future schemes desired for Ely and Caerau (Energy related and beyond)

Through discussing what the solar PV scheme could potentially support, and in response to other questions asked in the interview about the local community, participants had several opportunities to talk about what community schemes they would like to see being developed in the area.

I don't really know a lot that goes on in the community for my age group, you know, I know they do after school clubs for kids and that sort of thing. And I think, because I have got younger brothers and sisters that have lived around this area, I think something needs to be done to keep kids off the street, you know. And if I'm here when I decide to have kids, I'd want to know that there was something that, you know, whether it's for children or something that adults can go to, you know, like evening classes, all that sort of thing (Lauren)

Other groups/activities that people wanted to see investment in included; activities for teenagers, day centres for the elderly, play facilities, community integration activities or events, and crisis loans to facilitate unemployed people's return to work.

In terms of energy related activities, some participants mentioned that being involved even peripherally in the Solar PV scheme had helped them to think through issues related to energy. Indeed, it would seem that the scheme was a spring-board for thinking about energy more widely, whether in terms of fuel poverty or behaviour change.

by sort of promoting the Futurespace, the solar panels, by telling them the benefits of what they could have and things like that ... I've sort of got them thinking about the bills and that you know? They haven't realised because we've been talking but then they've said the same – that they are definitely looking at their energy a bit better (Caroline)

Specific ideas for other energy projects talked about or suggested were: moving to LED light bulbs, insulation, wholesale buying of energy efficient appliances to then sell on (at reduced cost) to vulnerable groups, other energy supply schemes (e.g. hydro-electricity), the need for trusted energy saving advice (that people can act upon) and education schemes. There was recognition that Futurespace is already involved in developing some of these ideas. Beyond these specific ideas, it is clear that the residents of Ely and Caerau desire support in a variety of areas related to energy.

Summary

Participants were positive about the work of community groups and viewed tackling fuel poverty as an important issue for the area. Some felt that although the Solar PV scheme had not been realised in the way initially envisaged, it had had a positive impact in encouraging people to think about their energy use and make changes. Active community groups and networks were key in communicating information about the scheme and for helping people to think about energy.

For more information visit www.energybiographies.org or contact Dr Fiona Shirani on 02920 876520 / fionashirani@cardiff.ac.uk