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## **Introduction**

The significance of life transitions in relation to everyday energy use is of central concern to the Energy Biographies project, and a growing number of research studies in this field. Researchers are increasingly moving beyond straightforward assertions about life transitions as moments of potential intervention to reduce energy use, in order to consider some of the challenges and complexities around life course events. This is the focus of several of our current and in press publications (see <http://energybiographies.org/our-work/our-findings/publications/>).

Discussion of life course events has often focused on the idea of ‘moments of change’ or ‘critical moments’ (such as the arrival of a new baby, or retiring from work) (see e.g. Holland and Thomson, 2009). These frequently refer to significant life events that involve a change in status or circumstances. However, such terms may be misleading as these changes are not necessarily confined to a particular moment; instead the implications and repercussions play out over time. This is made more visible in studies like Energy Biographies that revisit people on multiple occasions to provide a longer-term perspective (see also Burningham et al., 2014). In addition, changes may not necessarily be easily identifiable as individual moments, but are often the result of a gradual accumulation of events, which, again, a longitudinal perspective can help to elucidate.

It is also important to consider moments that may not be termed ‘critical’ by either participants or researchers, as the term ‘critical’ implies momentous change, when in fact important moments may initially appear to be relatively mundane. These more mundane moments could include hearing media messages, or a chance encounter with a stranger, which result in a significant impact on an individual or household’s energy use. In this working paper we explore in detail some of our participants’ stories around these occasions to demonstrate the different ways they have implications for energy use and environmental awareness.

This document is designed primarily to foreground some of our participants’ stories by presenting extended interview narratives, rather than explore in detail debates in the academic literature. However, we have included some references to our own and others’ publications should readers be interested to undertake further reading on the themes raised.

## **Energy Biographies**

The Energy Biographies project involved interviewing people from four case site areas across England and Wales on up to three occasions over a one year period, and also incorporated some photograph activities. These case sites are; Ely and Caerau (a large inner-city ward of Cardiff); Peterston-Super-Ely (an affluent commuter village on the outskirts of Cardiff); Lammas Tir-y-Gafel ecovillage (a low-impact, off-grid community in Pembrokeshire); and the Royal Free Hospital (participants were employees of this large teaching hospital and lived in various locations across London and further afield). The extracts in this working paper come from the first round of interviews, which involved 74 people across the four case sites. (See <http://energybiographies.org/case-sites/> for more information on our case sites or <http://energybiographies.org/our-project/project-design/> for further detail on the project's methodological approach).

## **Exploring stories in the data**

As described, this working paper is an opportunity to present extended extracts of texts from participants across our four case sites in order to foreground their stories about energy use. Rather than focus on moments of significant life change, which are the focus of some of our other publications, we highlight some of the themes that emerged in relation to more mundane aspects of daily life.

## ***Money***

One of the prominent themes in people's stories about energy use was the impact of financial costs. People's stories about changing their energy use often involved being surprised by a large energy bill and subsequently being motivated to make changes in order to save money:

When I was first here, I couldn't work out the timer, I didn't know how that was working for changing the temperature and all of that thing. So I really didn't know how that worked, which is probably why I had a bit of a hefty bill after the first two months of being here. Because I didn't know but it was on constantly, [laughs] throughout the whole winter it was constant. So when that bill came through I thought, that has got something to do with it, you know, I don't use a massive amount of energy elsewhere, I don't think, in comparison. So I thought, well maybe it's time for me to work out how to use the timer. So then it's all now pre-set. So it sort of will go to a certain temperature in the morning at a certain time, then it will drop down through the day if I'm not here. Obviously with me being here, I sometimes have to fiddle with it a little bit. But if not then I might just close the door, put the heater on in here, if this is the only room that I'm using, rather than heating up the whole house, and then it's fine or I've got like throws, little blanket things

if I'm cold ... I've pre-set it and set it all so that it's at temperatures for a certain time of day. So in the morning when I would first wake up, it's at quite a high temperature or it will like click on about half an hour before I'm due to wake up, so it's warmer. And the same then for when I would come home from work, put it on so that it's warm enough for when I come in and it's not just warming up at that point. Because then I probably would have the tendency to whack the temperature up, because as soon as I come in it's freezing, rather than it being a nice temperature only like half an hour beforehand. And then throughout the day it's pretty much off. But it's quite, I think because it's a terrace, it keeps the heat quite well in here actually because you've got something either side ... So yes, I don't really fiddle with it a lot, now that I know how to set it. (Lauren, 20s, Ely)

Here Lauren describes how a big energy bill prompted her to learn how to use the timer to maintain a comfortable temperature in her home, using advanced timer settings to avoid sudden cold spots that could prompt high heating levels (with subsequent cost implications). Several participants across our case sites told similar stories about a financial shock from a large bill causing them to make changes. For some people, it was important to make financial savings as they had a restricted income and could not afford large energy bills. For others making savings was not necessarily an issue of affordability, but that there were other things they would prefer to spend their money on – an idea we return to later.

Some people used, or suggested that they would like to use, devices such as smart meters to help them monitor their energy use. However, most people felt the information provided by such devices would be more meaningful if it detailed the cost of energy used, rather than cost per unit of consumption (e.g. per kWh).

I would like a smart meter; I think smart meters sound really sensible. And I know that there's evidence, you know, other researchers have shown empirically that it does affect people's behaviour. But I don't monitor, I'm paying bills by direct debit, so it's the same amount of money leaves every month. When they tell me that I've got a massive surplus, my first reaction is, well I'm going to ask for it back then ... But I'm not monitoring on a monthly basis, more like on a bi-annual basis, I will notice the amount of money but not the kilowatt hours or anything like that. (Jonathan, 40s, Peterston)

Research on smart meters suggests their use is not straightforward and should be viewed in the context of broader household practices. They may also serve to reinforce ideas about what counts as 'normal' energy use, which could prevent people from making changes to energy practices (see Hargreaves et al., 2013 for discussion). Like Jonathan, Jeffery suggests that working

out the financial cost is more meaningful than the other information his smart meter provides, and calculating this is something he and his wife make an effort to do:

Jeffery: I'm not sure if I am or not but this, this gadget that we've been given by the gas board should tell us how much energy we're using every day. But I've never got into, I did get it going but unless you know the percentage of gas you're using and cost, you can't work out how much it's costing you. It will tell you on the gadget but it may not correspond to what your energy is, what you're paying for in your house. So you have to calculate that, you've got to tell it it's say 5p a unit, whereby if you use it as it's been set, it can be set as 7 or 3, of course it's out. So what I do, I do it manually. I register, write it down, what I've used each month, because you've got to tell them anyway, and then Alison keeps a record upstairs on the computer of our energy use. And she says, we've spent £100 on energy this month, where's it gone? I said, well you left your computer on for a couple of days haven't you? ... And when I just, just before Christmas I bought myself a DVD blue ray player recorder. And when the chap came here and plugged it in, he said to me, 'it's all set up now'. He said, 'you can leave it switched on, on standby, and it will record anything you've asked it to record, it will all be programmed'. And I said to him, 'hang on', I said, 'we turn our television off on the plug every night to save energy'. He said, 'that is the latest model and machine you could purchase and the amount of energy that is using is fractional'. He said, 'hardly register'. And he said, 'your television's the same, it's modern', he said, 'your Sky, modern'. He said, 'the only thing I'd throw out of the window out of there is your video'. He said, 'that's old time, that uses energy, that is a thing that you shouldn't be using, but the rest it can stay on standby'. I haven't taken any notice of him, I just turn it off.

Interviewer: Why not then, why haven't you listened to him, what's made you

Jeffery: Because no matter how much fraction you're using, it all adds up over a period, and it's a fraction of everything that's there. So you've got your DVD player, you've got your Sky, you've got your television, so I reckon over a week you could save yourself maybe £5. I could be wasting my time doing it but I'm happy and I do everything I can to save energy. (Jeffery, 70s, Ely)

In this extract, Jeffery describes his conversation with a technology 'expert' but chooses to disregard his advice, instead preferring to switch everything off as he felt that even small savings would make a difference. The imperative to switch off appliances when they were not in use seemed strongly ingrained for many people and was commented on throughout the course of the project. However, some felt that financial savings from doing this would be so minimal that it was more convenient to leave appliances on.

Gareth: Yeah we turn the lights off and we turn the heating off if we don't need it, that sort of thing but apart from that not a lot. Like the telly's on now and nobody is watching, I could have turned it off but.

Interviewer: Why don't you do things like turning it off?

Gareth: Just don't really think about it you know what I mean? It's not using that much electricity, it's not as if it's scoring loads of points on the meter so it's just can't be bothered I suppose. (Gareth, 50s, Ely)

The idea of cost saving being a primary motivator for reducing energy use raises important questions about how people behave when they are not directly responsible for paying for energy. This may be a particularly important issue for considering energy use in the workplace, which is an area we are seeking to explore in forthcoming work.

## **People**

Another major theme to emerge in the stories of everyday influences on energy use was the impact of other people. Some of our participants reflected on the ways their own energy saving behaviour had appeared to influence friends, or be disregarded by others.

Yes it's like my friend really, it's really funny as well because she used to use more heating but I never used to have it on and I'm like 'No heating until October'. I don't have it on at all, nothing, I'm quite mean, she's gone more like me and she says, 'Oh Kelly won't have her heating on!' So she's better than me now [laughs] and her house is freezing, even I, cold? Oh my God, bloody hell! And she's just added on her kitchen and she's got lots of light in, so she doesn't have to use lights and she's put her own solar panels on. So she's gone really sort of environmentally friendly ... I've got other friends who have got, their washing line came down and they didn't put it up for like ages, for like six months, so they just used the tumble dryer rather than someone going in and fixing the washing line back up or other people who won't 'oh I don't want those type of things on the line so I tumble dry'. Tumble dryers really annoy me because I think we don't use a tumble dryer and even in [previous home] when we just had the calor gas I had a clothes horse, the clothes still dried and you don't need to use tumble dryers to dry all your washing, and a lot of them, they won't even have a clothes horse, just all winter they use a tumble dryer and then like, 'Oh then you don't have to iron' I think that's such a waste of money and I hate the tumble dryer, just buy a clothes horse (Kelly, 30s, Ely)

Kelly's extract illustrates some important concepts that the Energy Biographies project has identified as being significant for understanding the different ways people construct the wider meaning of how energy is used; first, she describes herself as 'mean' for restricting the heating

and second that her friend's seemingly greater restrictions are described as 'better'. There was a difficult balance for many of our participants between being careful with energy because saving energy was widely regarded as a 'good thing' (although aside from saving money not everyone was clear as to why), and not being overly restrictive so as to be regarded as miserly. The line between 'thrifty' and 'stingy' was often drawn around behaviour towards guests – restrictions that could be applied to one's own family were deemed inappropriate for visitors, even in situations where energy was in short supply, as Rachel describes:

I remember once letting my friend run a whole tank of water off [laughs] because I didn't, you know because we are just living off of collected water at that moment and I just thought, 'no he's been ever so good and he's accepted a whole load of weird stuff like having to poo outside' and I couldn't bear to tell him, I could see him brush his teeth with tap running, tap running and tap running and it was like I couldn't tell him and then the tank was gone really pretty much. So I let them take more share of the energy than I would necessarily take. But with my dad and my sister who is my only family alive of my close family, I didn't really need to because it's fairly relaxed thing between us. (Rachel, 30s, Lammas)

More frequently, people spoke about others who have had an influence on them. This might be friends who were particularly vocal or active in relation to energy and environmental issues, and who had prompted our participants to make changes in their own lives;

Ben: I've got a friend Harry who has had a big effect on me, he's just, he's very annoying in the sense that if there's any sort of lights on in the house he'll just go turning them off, which is very annoying but then I see why he's doing it and he's like "I want my kids to see the world, I want this ..." and he's exactly the same age as me and he's just, he stopped eating fish, he stopped eating meat because apparently the meat packing industry is like the worst for pollution in England and its apparently it's like I don't know what percentage 60 or 70% of or some high percentage and so he stopped eating meat, not because he doesn't like it; he used to love McDonalds. But yeah part of the reason why I double check I didn't leave the light on, it is on but I do tend, that's what I've taken home with me more than the first job I think, he's just really drummed into me "just look just turn off, it doesn't take that much to turn off a light", I hardly ever take plastic bags from the supermarket if I can just carry them or if I can put them in a bag then I do that just because he did and I think it's a good way to lead your life by. I think if everybody starts doing it then it will sort of slowly start to change or start to prevent the inevitable demise of the world! [Laughs]

Interviewer: So it's more sort of his you know his actions that have made you think about certain

Ben: Yeah I think so, like I didn't recycle before, like I'm not the biggest recycler in the world, I'm not a Marmite jar washer outer, I'm not but yeah cos he's a friend and I respect him I'll do what I can to sort of emulate what he's doing as well. (Ben, 20s, London)

Although Ben initially describes his friend's behaviour as 'annoying', respect for his friend's views has prompted Ben to make changes even though he would not regard himself as a particularly energy or environmentally conscious person, as he reflects in saying 'I'm not a Marmite jar washer outer'. However, as he notices during the interview, he had left lights on, so the extent to which these practical changes have percolated throughout his everyday life, rather than just influencing his professed ideals, is less clear.

Learning from friends highlights the importance of existing trusted relationships as a source of messages about energy that can lead to practical changes, which is an issue we have explored in detail elsewhere (Parkhill et al., forthcoming see also <http://energybiographies.org/our-work/our-findings/reports/>). Other people gained similar insights from family members. For example, seeing her sister successfully use a cold water washing machine prompted Caroline to opt for a model with a similar cycle when she bought a new appliance.

Caroline: I have got a cold water cycle in mine which is only a 30 minute so I do a lot in cold water now so I do use the energy one quite often.

Interviewer: So when did you start sort of using that cycle then?

Caroline: Last year when my washing machine went.

Interviewer: So is this a new one?

Caroline: Yes its exactly a year old now and that was one of the things I liked because my sister got a place in Tenerife and of course they use, they don't use hot water in the hot countries they use all cold water and so I started doing that so I noticed it's a quicker cycle, much better and the clothes are not really dirty the clothes they're just, so it's only freshening them up so that's a good, I'm quite pleased with my new washing machine, its good ... because my sister got the washing machine in Tenerife I knew about the cold water and because when I first asked, 'cold water? How can you wash with cold water?' And you know when she took it out after half an hour it was clean and she said 'when you look at it Caroline we don't dirty clothes like that'. And well there you are it just proved the other day my son had his, brought home his football kit so that's Saturday and his socks were filthy and yet I put it quickly in the half hour cold wash and it was fine. And I thought hmm. So it just goes to prove we don't need all the two hours programmes. (Caroline, 60s, Ely)

In Caroline's case, hearing about and witnessing the successful use of an energy saving appliance from a trusted source was an important factor in her appliance purchasing decision and led to changing her washing routines.

All participants were asked if they felt that they had had an influence on other people's views around energy and environmental issues. Many people felt that they had not, but some of our interviews with those who knew one another illustrated ways in which people may have had an influence without realising it. This is demonstrated by Gwen and Phoebe (in separate interviews), who cited each other as important influences, although both said they did not think they had had an impact on others.

Well I was thinking about them [energy/environmental issues] a bit but not a lot, the only reason I think I think about them is that my granddaughter is very keen on saving the planet and so I would have you know she's sort of got me going, saying 'oh [gran] you must do this, oh you mustn't do that' so yes that made me more aware of it. And I mean it's a big thing in Parliament, it's a big thing in the Assembly so all of that I hear about it you know but it doesn't come home until suddenly my granddaughter turned around and said I personally ought to be doing something about it, (Gwen, 80's, Peterston)

I suppose the other main influence is my Gran ... she reads lots so she'll like read something and then pick it up and then talk about it at the dinner table and then you'll be a bit more aware of that part or something like, I don't know, like how global warming has had an effect on like the whales or something or the dolphins and she'll like pick that up and then talk about it in conversation so she picks up on the small other things that people aren't very aware of in that sense. (Phoebe, teenager, Peterston)

Other participants spoke of the influence of housemates. Living in close proximity to someone and sharing resources could prompt people to discuss energy use, or simply offer opportunities to see different ways of living.

Yes, yes no, my awareness of it I guess it was different people that I came across and over time and then living in [city] they were very conscious, the people, my flatmates, the last house that I lived in they were all quite kind of, the guy had a little, he was trying to get a forest garden going in an allotment and the other girl was vegan, you know they were all quite kind of conscious of it all. Like little things that would happen in the house I would be like ok I didn't know that. Like even just like using the cooker, in the way that how much gas I would use if I blast it up and you know, like something like the flames are going around the pan and my flatmate would go 'oh you don't have to have it that high, you are wasting gas' and whatever and like I would never have thought about things like that, or just little conversations and the way

that they would sort of chip things into conversation I wouldn't have thought about it. But it has been a gradual gradual process. I was saying to someone the other day, when I was in [city] I didn't pick any herbs out of the garden because I thought that it was dirty (laughs) ... you know people say they won't eat a, they won't eat a lettuce that I have given them from the garden because it is dirty and they only eat them from the supermarket, and I am like yes I kind of get that mentality because I was like that myself you know. So and the different books that I read I just, opened my eyes to it and also coming here, again in other ways, (pause) seeing how people view consumption and things like that, again it is not something that I would have thought about. Just being exposed to people innit and what they think and having conversations with people and things like that, but it has been known for a period of like oh, what are we now 2012, five years? (Jada, 30s, Lammas)

Here Jada describes a 'gradual process' of changing her energy use and environmental ethos as a result of being 'exposed' to people with a range of views. Her experience demonstrates how, far from being locked in to particular views and practices, she made gradual changes based on what she learned from others. Whilst the change has been significant – so that she can look back and laugh on the views she held five years previously – it has not been down to one 'critical moment', but has instead depended on the accumulation of information and experiences.

Importantly, it was not just insights from trusted friends and family members that were seen as significant. Some people felt that strangers had been a crucial influence for change:

I reckon it's surprising what odd comments along the way in your life do, along the way do. I don't know if you agree but I've been thinking about this recently, there are certain little comments here and there, umm I'm surprised at the power of an individual person saying something that's really true and how much that can get into the mind. Definitely. One specific example, about why we wanted to build our own houses, was for me, we were first pregnant and we came to look to rent a house in Wales, Darren was working as [work details] so we thought we'd carry on doing that and we'd rent a house, and in a car park ... we met this lady and she was in her sixties and she'd just happened to build her own house and she just said to us, 'Young people if you've got a dream then follow it, you don't have to settle for an oil-fired centrally heated house if you don't want to!' That was her exact words and to be honest that was very pivotal. (Rachel, 30s, Lammas)

Overall, encounters or relationships with specific other people seemed to be particularly significant in passing on messages about changing energy use. Importantly, where interviewees had been responsible for passing on such messages, they were often unaware of their own influence. The content of the message matters too, however. Some of our more environmentally-active participants, such as Darren at Lammas, described the importance of not

seeming ‘stingy or tight’ by ‘restricting’ people into ‘ecologically sound behaviour’, but instead of ‘liberating’ them into it. These messages therefore should be positive (e.g. stress the wider and not just financial benefits of reducing energy consumption) rather than the more negative associations with privations that can accompany understandings of sustainable action, so as not to put others off. The relevance of sharing insights into energy saving has been highlighted by the RECKN project (see <http://www.reckn.org.uk/>) and our project findings would support the power of trusted relationships and opportunities to engage with energy interventions within the community (Parkhill et al., forthcoming, Shirani et al., 2015).

### ***Messages and gradual/accumulated change***

Our community case sites were characterised by different levels of interventions and initiatives around energy saving and environmental issues. For example, the Royal Free Hospital has a number of carbon reduction and energy saving targets, but its employees may have different levels of engagement with this in their work and home lives. In contrast, energy permeates all aspects of life at the Lammas ecovillage, where residents live off-grid with a limited energy supply, although energy saving is not necessarily an important motivation for choosing to live there. Both Ely and Peterston had different community level interventions around solar panels (for details see <http://energybiographies.org/our-work/our-findings/reports/>). For some people, involvement with or knowledge about these schemes undoubtedly prompted them to think more widely about energy saving, as Colin describes:

Colin: Yeah because you can see sort of, I’ve read more about saving energy on the Action Caerau and Ely website in Futurespace [community energy initiative] and they give you tips on how to save energy and things like that and that’s useful so I do, I think it’s more Futurespace involvement a bit more aware of things.

Interviewer: I mean can you think of any examples of stuff you have seen on the website about saving energy that you’ve then done?

Colin: I think I suppose where they are checking the thickness of loft insulation and learning more about the wall cavity insulation and putting draught excluders on the doors and even the brush things on the bottom of doors, I do have one of those on the kitchen one. And I’ve been doing sort of bits and pieces like that over the years and I’ve got to the stage where I put sellotape over the key hole of my back door there because the wind comes rushing through there and let the heat out so I don’t know which one is the more force!

Interviewer: So you just noticed that when you were in there and thought it's a bit draughty?

Colin: Yeah sort of by the microwave its sort of right by there I've got this draught coming at me but no I do, I have looked more really since with Futurespace and that so what else is there? Putting your washing machine on a lower temperature as well, washing at 30 and you see that advertised anyway like different brands of say Ariel I think it is you can wash at 30 and your clothes are still as nice as if they're 60, it hasn't quite worked with my machine yet though, it doesn't feel like it comes out as nice so I have actually stuck to 40. I will usually avoid using 60 actually so I always use the 40 anyway. (Colin, 40s, Ely)

Several residents of both Ely and Peterston suggested that in addition to sharing knowledge about the schemes through trusted networks, an important element in encouraging wider enthusiasm would be to highlight the community benefits of such enterprises. This was less clear in Peterston where the solar panels were promoted as individual investments, although people in the village spoke about the potential for more community focused initiatives.

Margaret: I think, again, if people can see that something like that is actually helping something in the community I think that often, things go further because of that. I think there are communities that are doing things that, oh, what did I read the other day?

Ralph: The water one?

Margaret: Yes, a water wheel

Ralph: Yeah, yeah, generating water if you have a good stream or river flowing through your area.

Margaret: ... and then it was being used for things within the village. So a mill for grinding flour or whatever and I think that there they were talking about the fact that as soon as people knew that it was for, actually for a specific thing rather than just feeding the general grid, that there was a better response.

Ralph: You've got to capture the imagination somehow I think if you're going actually to see some real benefits within a small village like this. We go up to Scotland a lot. We were on one of the small islands off of the West coast about three or four years ago; Gigha, which has been taken over, effectively, by the people and they have put up I think it was about four windmills wasn't it? [Margaret agrees] on the rear of the island. Now for an island that's only occupied by about a hundred max people ...

Margaret: About that.

Ralph: ... they were generating £80,000 of cash that went straight into their community by having those on one end of the island. Now, okay, that's an opportunity but if you could do what you're saying and generate a bit of water power and if you can put some solar panels on and the community sees that as a benefit I think they would change their views quite considerably. They would become involved as in fact some of the solar panel people have, who all regard themselves as anoraks now because they keep popping into the garage to see how much they are generating. I mean you don't want to take it too far but I think that would actually help a village community anyway and stop a lot of apathy about this, that and the other that we do get in certain areas of villages, including Peterston. (Ralph and Margaret, 60s, Peterston)

In addition to these local initiatives about energy, people encountered more widespread messages through the media – like the washing at 30 campaign that Colin refers to above. Particularly for those in our London sample who were not originally from the UK, insights from other countries via experiences, communications with friends and relatives, or media stories were also important.

I think there's a lot what we see in the media. I still check the news in Brazil and I check the news here as well. And you can see new research showing that if you switch off your tap when you're brushing your teeth, you're going to save that many litres of water. And then you start thinking, 'oh if I do that when I'm washing my dishes and if I do that when I'm...' you know, these kinds of small changes. And then you start extrapolating that to, if I'm making my tea and I'm just heating one cup of water rather than a litre, that's saving as well. So you learn from that, from picking up small pieces of information and extrapolating it to your life. I couldn't remember the name of the specific people, but I saw a lot of those kind of things in documentaries about how the planet's not coping with seven billion people anymore. And you stop and think, what can I do within my routine that's not going to be a life changing situation? So I'm not moving to Africa but maybe if I save my water here, then we don't need to, we won't have problems here. And then, instead of fixing things here, we can help them to fix things there. So you start making small changes, in order to see the big changes happening as well. (Suzanna, 30s, London)

Here Suzanna describes how the insights she has gained from multiple sources about wider issues has prompted her to make small changes within her everyday routine. Some people articulated stories where their accumulated knowledge and experiences were brought into focus by a particular moment, as Ruth describes:

I was standing in a supermarket and I looked at a plastic package of carrots in my hand and just thought, 'I've got to get some land and grow my own, because there will be less plastic and less transport'. I was living in [city] at the time and it was a small Tesco's I was in. That was one of numerous things that happened ... I had been sort of thinking about it for quite a long time and I

decided that I was going to give up my permanent job and sold my flat and see if I could find a sustainable way to live. I did that at the end of 2005 and basically became a volunteer on organic farms, did a permaculture course and a Sustainable Land Use course, made a yurt and just was trying to gather as much experience as possible, I had a bit of money in the bank from selling my flat and my dream was to buy some land, hopefully set up a business on it and then through that, maybe one day be able to build a house but it was a bit of a long shot because I didn't have a lot of capital and I was one and a half years living out of a rucksack [laughs] ... I went to Spain, New Zealand, back to [city] and I was always on the point of sort of giving up, thinking this is never 'I'm never going to be able to do this, got to downsize'. I thought I was going to join a community farm in Cornwall for a bit and then I didn't and then I saw an advert for here so I basically applied and came here (Ruth, 40s, Lammas)

Here Ruth's experience whilst out shopping puts into context 'numerous' thoughts and events, which she describes as eventually leading to her joining the ecovillage community. Moving to the ecovillage could be seen as a momentous life change, particularly for those who had no previous experience of off-grid or low-impact living. However, residents and long-term volunteers rarely described moving there as based on a single decision, but more frequently on the accumulation of smaller choices that led up to this large change:

No I never thought that we would actually do it, actually move here. There was this thing called Doing Lammas, like are we going to Do it? Are we going to do Lammas? We did our homework and it was a bit like being as at a fairground on a really scary ride you know, at the beginning of the process you thought 'this seems really interesting I think I'll go and have a look at this' and then the next thing you're in the queue and then at some point it's like 'well we need £2000 off you to secure something and as a sign of your commitment' and it's like 'oh shit are we going to do that? Are we going to give £2000?' that's a big amount of money, that's a big commitment and then we'd be like writing the cheque and we'd be putting it in the envelope and it's like 'are we going to post it?' We've posted it, we're like up the ladder, the ride's at the top and we're getting closer and closer and then you know that moment when the person before you goes down and you're just like 'oh my god, reality!' [Laughs] (Laura, 40s, Lammas)

Laura's analogy of the move to Lammas as a rollercoaster ride vividly represents the individual steps that led up to a significant change for her family – the enormity of the change is somehow masked by thinking about it in terms of small steps. In Russell's extended narrative below, he describes multiple things that have had an impact on changes in his day-to-day life:

Russell: I mean I have to say the old house that I used to own we were in the process of re-doing it and that ate a lot of energy so that had a huge heating

and gas bill. The last place we were in was an old Victorian flat and it was owned by a Trust so you know I was house sitting and I paid the electric bill and I think we were looking at about £520 a quarter and that's just you know that was the gas bill and the electric bill I think was another £120 on top of that and you're thinking, and the house still wasn't warm and in the winter time you're just kind of cold, summer it was great, it was nice and cool in the summer time but you know after a while you're thinking this is a lot of money that I'm pumping away and I'm thinking here I'm probably spending, I think we're spending about £250 a quarter, during the winter time about £250 a quarter, which is half and you know then this is upstairs, downstairs that was just one floor.

Interviewer: And is it through costs that you're able, you know you don't look at the units you're using, its cost that sort of helps you?

Russell: Yeah well I mean as far the, yeah I look at costs, I guess cost tell you what kind of units you use. I'd say the two other people I live with I mean they're quite, you know lights do go off in their rooms ... we do keep a constant effort, I don't know why we do but, well one of them is pretty much an ex-hippy or he likes to be a hippy so I think that has, he is very conscious of the environment and everything and he has a go at everyone when we don't. And yeah I think another thing is just costs, keeping costs down because you know not that, I don't think a lot about money but I like the idea that if I spend money I'm spending it on something I want to spend it on not stuff I don't want to spend it on.

Interviewer: So apart from putting the energy saving light bulbs, the dimmer switches and all those various other things you already talked about are there other things that you do to try and keep your energy usage down?

Russell: I have to say that I walk a lot more, I walk whenever possible. If I'm going to [station] I never take the bus I walk to [station], walk back, I walk to the store which is about ten/fifteen minutes, we do the grocery shop and stuff like that, we do that and yeah I mean hardly ever, never hardly take cabs and things, I try and take mass transit as much as possible if I do have to take it so I guess that's more of a conscious effort. Before I used to, about five years ago I used to call cabs all the time! [Laughs]

Interviewer: So what sort of prompted the change then do you think? ...

Russell: ... I guess as far the walking side of things go I mean I do feel, I have arthritis in my knees and I want to start walking more and that pretty much solved that problem and felt healthier and you know and I guess you know cleaner air but you know I guess you know you just kind of get into it and now once you do it for like a month and you know I used to walk to work, and I think that's pretty much what started it when I used to walk to work and now I actually quite enjoy it, I've got my headphones and bopping away to my music you know ... I mean it's not so much from energy sort of side I think it's more from the relaxation side. (Russell, 40s, London)

Russell's story brings together a number of the elements we have explored in this paper so far. Firstly, his experience of living in an old property with expensive energy bills show the relevance of fuel costs when moving to his next (newer) property. He suggests it is not an issue of affordability – 'I don't think a lot about money' – but spending priority – 'I like the idea that if I spend money I'm spending it on something I want to spend it on'. Secondly, Russell points to the influence of other people – in this case his 'ex-hippy' housemate – for passing on messages about reducing energy use. Finally, he describes how he has made changes to his daily routine – by walking instead of taking taxis – motivated by health reasons, which has additional implications for energy use. This points to the way in which some people may be easily able to identify particular moments where they have made explicit changes around energy use, whilst for others, lifestyle changes may be made for a variety of reasons, which participants may not think to describe in response to a question with a particular energy use focus despite them having repercussions for energy use. These extracts also highlight the challenges of using concepts such as 'critical moments' or 'moments of change' – it may not be down to one identifiable moment but could be the result of the accumulation of experiences. Similarly, some of the more mundane prompts for change may not be seen as 'critical' either by participant or researcher. These are issues we are seeking to explore in current analytical work.

### ***Not making changes***

So far we have explored occasions where participants have made changes to their energy use. However, it is also important to consider the times when events or experiences around energy do not prompt a change. Sometimes, people may have little awareness of some aspects of their energy use:

I don't know because I'm not there a lot of the time during the day but I quite often find myself turning lights off that I don't think should be on and having a bit of a whinge about it and stuff like that. I'm trying to think what else we fall out about occasionally. Leaving the fridge door open. But what I've discovered, I notice when she does it but not when I do it! [laughs] I've only realised that recently because we fell out about it, not 'fell out' we were joking about it 'You've left the blinkin' fridge door open again' and she's like, 'Get off my back' sort of stuff. So she said, 'I was literally coming across just to put it [milk] into the tea and I was going to put it back'. I said, 'Yes but you're letting the heat out!' Then the other day I turned round and found I'd left the fridge open and I just thought, 'I wonder how often I actually do that?' 'I just notice it in her and not me!' Little things like that. We don't have major battles but I'm probably a little bit more conscious about it ... I'm also very, very unobservant, so I don't, what tends to happen, like the light thing here. If

something has been brought to my attention and I'm aware of it then I'll notice but if it's not something that's on my radar, I just think, just ridiculous things pass me by as I'm walking around here, I don't notice things ... So what probably happens in the house is that I will have a few pet things that I'm really aware of and conscious of, like switching things off or not filling the kettle up too full or all that sort of stuff, there are probably other things that have just completely passed me by, I'm sure there are so [laughs] (Steve, 30s, Ely)

In this extract Steve, who describes himself as 'conscious' about energy saving, points to occasions where he notices his wife's arguably inefficient practices but not his own. He later points out the importance of messages being relevant – 'on my radar' – so they do not otherwise go unnoticed. In other cases, people did notice energy issues but did not make any changes because they did not feel they had the power to do so.

Interviewer: Can you remember any occasion when you've actually been without energy and can you tell me about it?

Lucinda: Yes we got flooded once ... yeah a pipe burst in our utility cupboard and we were without energy and we were without water more than the energy, we were without water and that was not good.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a bit more about that then what was it like? I mean what did you miss and how did go about your everyday sort of business when it was like that?

Lucinda: It wasn't for very long but you realise how much you are reliant on just turning the tap and water coming out of it and there is an unlimited supply just at the turn of the tap, just buying bottled water and just thinking oh gosh I need to do the washing and I can't because I can't run the washing machine, I can't do the washing up or I can do it in very limited amount of water, I can't flush the toilet, I can't flush it every single time, that wasn't good....

Interviewer: ... did you think sort of thing oh I need to think about you know contingency plans if this happens again or?

Lucinda: It didn't even occur to me because it's also the fact that the flat is rented that it's not directly our responsibility, that it's a responsibility of the landlord. (Lucinda, 30s, London)

Like others who rented rather than owned properties, Lucinda described how she felt unable to address some energy issues in her home as this was the landlord's responsibility. This was also an issue for some people in the workplace, who felt they did not have the ability to make changes to energy practices.

## *Continuity*

Thus far we have highlighted changes (or their absence) in energy use, yet another important aspect of people's energy stories is continuity. In the extract below, Jonathan describes intergenerational continuity in his family in relation to values of not being wasteful.

Jonathan: When I look back now, as you were asking me that, I could see in my mind's eye the house I grew up in. It wasn't the kind of house where all the lights would be on, the lights would be on in places like the kitchen because people were always popping in there, and the sitting room. But we had two other ground floor rooms you see, and another sitting room and, what we called, the dining room. We wouldn't put the lights on in there if there was no one in there. It was a kind of like, because they [his parents] were teenagers in the war. I think probably, you go back far enough and people, it's just common sense. And I think we lost common sense on things like energy and material usage, in perhaps the Sixties and Seventies, where the standard of living went up. But because my parents were quite old, they were 37 and 39 when I was born in 1966, and their parents were old having them, I often feel I grew up with quite Victorian values because I was dealing really with the culture of my grandparents, not the culture of my parents so much ... And you wouldn't, though in that kind of world, why would you waste something? It was just stupid to waste anything. You would make do and mend because to do otherwise, it wouldn't occur to them, it would be nonsensical. And also, you know, they were quite religious people, they would have, there was a sense of kind of like, there was a kind of morality to it all of being modest. These are all kind of values of non-conformist Protestantism, so being modest in your behaviour, in your attire, in your use of the earth's resources, yes it's all that kind of stuff. Again, I never thought of that before you see, it's fantastic yes ... I think it was so much a part of who they were, I don't think they were even aware of it. So it was just what they did, it was just the way things were and there was no other way really.

Interviewer: And what of those sort of values have you brought forward throughout your life?

Jonathan: I think a lot of them, yes. I think it's like not, the culture I come from, it doesn't encourage or appreciate anything that you might call flashy or show off, and I think that's very much a part of my world. You distrust profligacy, yes there's that word again, you distrust and disdain and look down on profligacy and flashiness. (Jonathan, 40s, Peterston)

Here Jonathan roots his current values around energy in his parents' experience of World War Two and his grandparents' 'Victorian values'. The morality of modesty was a theme evident in other participants' stories, relating back to the idea discussed on page 5 that being careful with energy use is preferable to profligacy. What counts as wasteful then is an important consideration. For example, in work currently under development we have explored situations

where our participants have high levels of energy use, but this is deemed necessary as an aspect of care for family members, so would not be considered wasteful (see also Shirani et al., 2013).

### ***Conclusions***

This paper has presented some participant stories from the Energy Biographies project to demonstrate how these vivid and powerful representations can provide insights into everyday energy use. Encouraging people to articulate their views and experiences in this way can also be helpful and enjoyable, as the above quote from Jonathan indicates – ‘I never thought of that before you see, it’s fantastic’.

The theme of money being central to people’s discussions of energy use is perhaps unsurprising; paying fuel bills may be one way in which energy becomes visible in everyday life, particularly in circumstances of fuel poverty. However, beyond issues of affordability, cost appears relevant in notions of wastefulness and spending priorities, as even where participants could afford high energy bills, this is not seen as a good use of money.

The significance of other people should also not be underestimated. The relevance of these trusted relationships for communicating messages about energy saving is an important consideration (see also Butler et al., 2014). Whilst values and insights may be shared by family and friends, even chance encounters with strangers can have a powerful influence.

The Energy Biographies project explores the relevance of life course change but problematizes the notion that such moments can necessarily be defined as ‘critical’, or indeed even as discrete moments rather than accumulated changes. Whilst we continue to highlight the relevance of exploring significant life course change, we also foreground the importance of considering experiences or encounters that may appear relatively mundane, as these may offer particular insights into everyday energy use.

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