

How are people understood in energy and climate governance?

Research Briefing, October 2022

Summary

This briefing summarises findings from a [research paper](#) analysing how people are understood in energy and climate governance in the UK. The research involved linguistic analysis of governance documents, and interviews with policy stakeholders.

The research reveals that governance is seen as primarily a technical, rather than social, undertaking. People are not mentioned much. When they are mentioned, people tend to be described in terms of their economic function, with a 'consumer' framing dominant, and little attempt to differentiate between different demographics or outlooks.

Policy stakeholders understand the problems of this approach, and argue for a more comprehensive understanding of people in governance. They see the technical and economic framing as a consequence of market-based energy policy, and centralised governance, as well as the training, processes and culture of governance organisations.

Evidence from this study suggests that reforms are needed to policy and governance. These include better use of social research, reforms to consultation processes, greater deliberative engagement, limits to marketised approaches to energy, and more localised energy and climate strategies.

1. Analysis of energy and climate governance documents

This research used corpus analysis, a statistical technique borrowed from linguistics, to analyse language use in governance documents including the 2021 Net Zero Strategy, and strategy documents from regulators and public bodies including Ofgem, the National Audit Office and the National Infrastructure Commission. These documents were compared with an economic policy document, the 2021 Budget and Spending Review.

The analysis revealed that energy and climate governance is seen primarily as a technical, rather than social, undertaking. People are mentioned half as often in energy and climate governance documents, compared to economic policy documents. Terms including 'technology', 'hydrogen', and 'market' are used more frequently than words describing people (see figure 1). Of the 50 most used nouns in the 2021 Net Zero Strategy, there are no words to describe people.

Energy & Climate Governance:

- **consumer** = 22nd most used noun; no others in top 100
- **community** = 123rd most used noun
- **more common:** *system, technology, hydrogen, market* (all top 20)

Budget comparison:

- **people** = 25th
- **community** = 50th
- **public** = 85th

More common: *funding, business, support, growth, debt* (all top 20)

Net Zero Strategy:

- **no 'people' nouns in top 50**
- **community** = 79th
- **consumer** = 85th
- **top 20:** *hydrogen, technology, strategy, fuel, gas, cost*

Regulators:

- **consumer** = 6th most used noun; no others in top 200
- **people** = 202nd
- **top 20:** *market, network, storage, cost, technology*

Figure 1: relative frequency of 'people' nouns within each text

When people are mentioned, they are described in terms of their economic function, with 'consumer' as the most common noun used to describe people. Strikingly, this economic framing is more dominant in energy and climate governance than the explicitly economic-focused Budget documentation being used for comparison, as the pie charts below show.

Energy & Climate Governance

Budget comparison

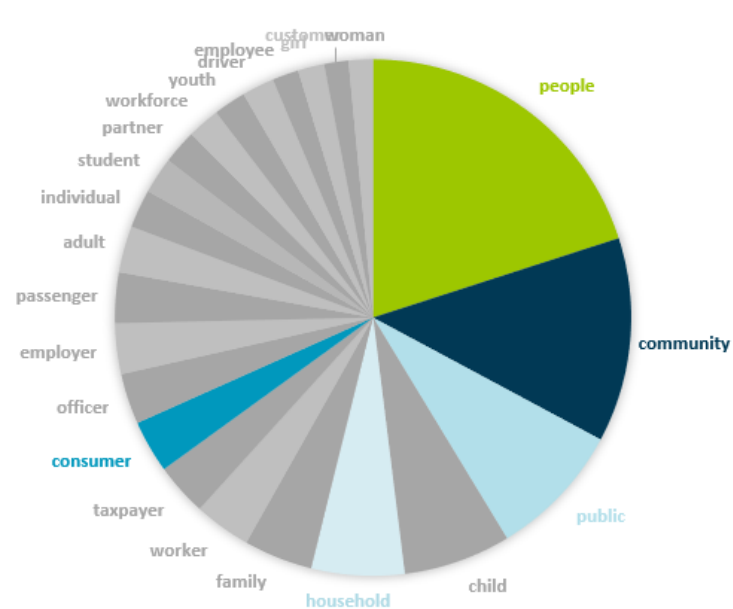
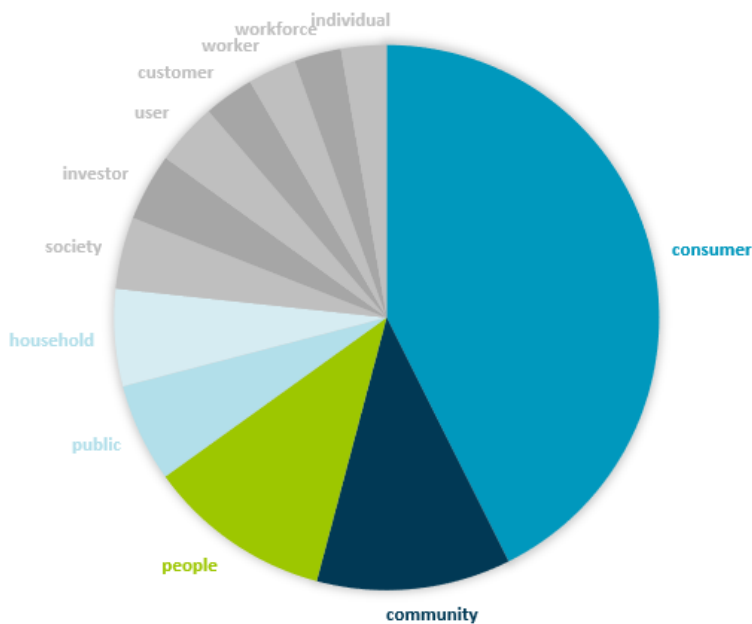


Figure 2: 'people' nouns in energy and climate governance, compared with the Budget

Overall, linguistic analysis reveals a lack of discussion of the role of people in energy and climate governance. When people are mentioned, the dominant framing is an individualised language of cost and choice, with 'consumers' playing a role in the 'market'.

2. Views of policy stakeholders

Stakeholders working in energy and climate governance find this focus on technical approaches, and the economic framing, problematic. They point out that the next phase of decarbonisation will involve changes to travel, home energy use and many other areas which impact on people's lives. Policies to encourage these changes will require careful engagement with people, which in turn requires a better understanding of their role.

"everyone's lives are going to change in some way over the next few decades... we will have to include people, letting them know what those changes are like from long in the background so they can see what's coming and be able to plan their lives". (analyst outside government)

The stakeholders interviewed think that there should be a more socially nuanced and differentiated understanding of people's varied roles, not just as consumers but as workers and members of a community.

They argue that the dominance of economic language is a direct consequence of a market-based regulatory system, and the duties ascribed to regulators, particularly 'consumer protection'. Interviewees also report that technical and economic analysis, and modelling, is dominant in government. This leads to people being seen, in the words of one interviewee, as 'economic processing units'.

"Economics is the language of Whitehall... it forces all policymaking through this very economic lens, and I think it's really interesting to pick that out because it does have all sorts of unspoken or unexamined implications. There's lots of different impacts and considerations in policy that don't neatly fit in with in that lens, and they often get lost." (analyst outside government)

There is limited analysis of social aspects of energy and climate governance within policymaking institutions. As a result, policymakers often resort to their own hunches, based on friends or family, in place of robust social research.

"What you actually end up with [when developing policy proposals] is lots of macroeconomics stuff, and then people saying, "Well, I'm not sure my mum would like this" or whatever, in a meeting. I personally think there's slightly more evidence-based ways of doing it." (former civil servant)

3. Implications for policy development

This study suggests that reforms are needed to policy and governance processes, both to incorporate better understandings of the role of individuals, not just as consumers but in their varied roles; and to shape policies which will engage and influence people. The research points to a number of such possible reforms:

Better use of social research: Government departments have social research divisions, but these are often isolated from policymaking functions. Policymakers could commission and use social research to test the potential impact of their policies on different groups of people, differentiated according to socioeconomic characteristics, geographical location and worldview. Such approaches would not replace existing methods of policy analysis, including economic and technical analysis, modelling and forecasting, but would supplement them, avoiding overly narrow or deterministic assumptions about people.

"The idea would just be to get a different sort of sense as to how people might behave in the real world, rather than in a kind of rational optimisation machine." (former civil servant)

Reforms to consultation processes: The statutory consultation process favours those who have the necessary resources and expertise, functionally excluding a large part of the population. Interviewees' suggestions for overcoming this included greater use of deliberative processes, which allow representative groups of citizens to develop their understanding of governance issues, and offer their own views and expertise.

Climate Assembly UK, convened by the UK Parliament in 2019-20, was an example of such a process. Deliberation provides a 'safe space' to discuss and test reactions to different strategies. It also allows more detailed dialogue and intelligence-gathering than would be possible through standard means such as opinion polls, surveys, voting or standard consultation processes.

"The next 30 years going to be sort of much more transformative changes in people's lives than the last 30 years of climate policy has been... The pathways need to be designed with the involvement of people who are going to be directly affected by those changes and designed around their priorities." (analyst outside government)

Limits to marketised approaches to energy: Some interviewees suggested a move away from a market-based, profit-oriented energy governance system. Under the market-based model of energy governance in the UK, governance is seen as primarily a job of economic regulation, with energy as a commodity, and people as consumers. However, evidence from public opinion research, together with findings from interviewees in this study, suggests that people see their role as wider than just consumers within a marketplace. Different models of regulation and provision, with a greater role for community ownership, nonprofit companies and municipal provision could therefore result in a different, more active role for people.

More localised energy and climate strategies: Many interviewees proposed a greater localisation of energy and climate policy. A more localised approach could help to bring forward policies that connect more explicitly to people's lives, grounded in local priorities. However, local areas would need clear responsibilities, powers and resourcing, to ensure that they contributed to the achievement of national carbon targets.

"Every area is different, they have different potential energy sources or different jobs, different skills profiles... you can help to visualise more what it would actually mean for you and why you might be interacting with it, not just as a consumer." (analyst outside government)

This is a summary of [a research paper](#) published in the journal *Energy Research and Social Science*, available free online.

Willis, R. Real people or "economic processing units"? The limited understanding of people's roles in energy and climate governance. Energy Research and Social Science, volume 93, November 2022.

