Governing pro-environmental behaviour change through community: the politics and practice of the Low Carbon Communities Challenge

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Abstract

Academics and policy-makers have claimed that community has a potentially useful role to play in encouraging pro-environmental behaviour change. Yet despite a growing literature on the role of community in doing so a critical examination of the policy context in which it is being employed towards that goal is currently lacking. This paper addresses that gap by presenting results from a qualitative case-study of the UK government funded Low Carbon Communities Challenge (LCCC). The paper highlights the conflict that exists between the instrumental application of community as a delivery-mechanism for government policy on carbon management and the normative understanding of community based on social relations and identification with place held by community members. Dominant policy approaches to carbon management focus on small scale behaviour change and the delivery of technological fixes aimed at improving carbon efficiency to passive consumer-citizens. Delivered through the LCCC, this approach ignored the normative understanding of community from consideration as a mechanism of change, and offered community members a limited and largely ineffective means by which to encourage pro-environmental behaviour change. The paper concludes with reflections on the implications of these findings on the role of community in the transition to a low(er) carbon society.
Introduction

Community has emerged in recent academic and policy debates as a potentially useful context through which to address the challenges presented by climate change. However, despite a growing literature on the role of community in doing so, there remains a lack of empirical evidence to support the claims being made of it. Two further problems exist. First, the narrow way in which community is conceptualised in the existing literature, with understandings based on geographical area and interest dominating. Second, the lack of an examination of the policy context in which community has been tasked with governing pro-environmental behaviour change. Recognising these points, Walker has argued for the need to be open to a ‘more problematic reality’ (Walker 2011, p778) of community than may be evident in current policy and campaigning rhetoric, along with the adoption of a critical perspective that recognises the contested nature of community. The critical perspective Walker calls for guided the research presented in this paper, the overarching question it asks being: what is the role of community in governing pro-environmental behaviour change?

The starting point in the development of a critical perspective on the role of community in governing pro-environmental behaviour change is, I argue, to incorporate a conceptual framework based on understandings developed in the literatures on the sociology and politics of community that it is partial, political and performed (e.g. Frazer 1999; Bauman 2000, 2001; Little 2002; Fremeaux 2005). In addition, attention to the various ways in which these performances are scripted or controlled by others is required. There is, therefore, a need to analyse the performance of community through the neo-Foucauldian framework of governmentality as detailed in the work of Miller and Rose (1990; Rose and Miller 1992, 2008) and Dean (2010) to develop a critical understanding of how it came to be constructed as an appropriate response to a problem of government, in this case the governance of environmental change. Through the application of such a conceptual framework, the beginnings of a critical understanding of the role of community in the governance of environmental change can be developed.

The paper presents results from a qualitative case-study analysis of a UK Government funded policy initiative, the Low Carbon Communities Challenge (LCCC), a two-year, £10m research project organised by the UK Government’s Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) that ran between February 2010 and February 2012. The proceeds as follows: in part 1, I introduce the key debates on the politics of community that, I argue, are missing from much of the existing literature analysing the role of community in the governance of environmental change. In particular, I outline how analysing community through the neo-Foucauldian framework of governmentality can contribute a crucial, and currently missing, perspective to the literature. In part 2, I introduce the LCCC in greater detail, together with a description of the methods employed. In part 3, the main contribution of this paper, I present an analysis of the changing role of community within the LCCC. I argue that during the course of the LCCC, community was understood and applied in an increasingly instrumental manner by DECC, in which the role of the social as a mechanism of change was gradually removed. Applied instrumentally, the principal role of community was as a delivery mechanism for technological fixes aimed at improving carbon efficiency to passive consumer-citizens; and as such did little to challenge existing social practices or patterns of normal behaviour. The paper concludes with reflections on the implications of these findings on the role of community in the transition to a low(er) carbon society.

The Politics of Community

Appeals to community as a normative concept capable of delivering positive social change have been frequently made. This was particularly true of the New Labour period of government in the United Kingdom (Fremeaux 2005), during which the LCCC was
introduced. New Labour’s ‘Third Way’ of governing was heavily influenced by communitarian thinkers such as Etzioni who saw community as ‘the main way that individuals and groups in a good society encourage one another to adhere to behaviour that reflects shared values and to avoid behaviour that offends or violates them’ (Etzioni 1997, p124). The Third Way policy agenda saw community as:

‘fundamental to the new politics, but not just as an abstract slogan (. . .) Community doesn’t simply imply trying to recapture lost forms of social solidarity; it refers to practical means of furthering the social and material refurbishment of neighbourhoods, towns and larger local areas.’

(Giddens 1998, p79)

Community was both the problem in that it had been lost, and the solution in that social and material benefit would accrue to those areas able to recapture it (Little 2002, Fremeaux 2005). For Third Way policy makers, Anthony Giddens both asked the question of ‘who decides where “the community” ends and others begin?’, and answered it: ‘government must adjudicate on these and other difficult questions’ (1998, p85). This approach to social policy resulted in a shift from centralised top-down universal policies towards a more localised approach where local government, community participation and stakeholder involvement in individual projects were seen as key. In this context, the local community was seen as the responsible and empowered local community in which members would look after each other through participation in public life, and active involvement in voluntary organisations (Giddens 1998, Little 2002, Amin 2005).

There was an assumption within such initiatives of the pre-existence of communities as local entities sharing a set of latent community values that policy interventions could revive, and in some cases, define (Fremeaux 2005). However, as numerous authors have noted, the assumption of a homogeneous community’s existence - whether within an arbitrary administrative boundary or not - is unlikely to be correct. Appeals to community exclude as many people as they include, as by defining boundaries there is an assumption of the existence of some way of distinguishing – and thereby excluding - members of one community from another. As those who draw the boundaries are often groups with power and vested interests, who may seek to deliberately exclude outsiders, the implementation of community as the solution to society’s ills is not without problems (Frazer 1999; Bauman 2001; Little 2002).

New Labour was not alone in its appropriation of community. Following the May 2010 general election the newly elected coalition government introduced its ‘Big Society’ policy agenda, in which community also took a central role (Alcock 2012). The Big Society was described as being ‘about putting more power in people’s hands – a massive transfer of power from Whitehall to local communities.’ (Cabinet Office n.d.). It focused on three key areas: community empowerment through which local councils and neighbourhoods were to be given more power to take decisions and shape their area; the opening up of public services to allow third and private sectors organisations to deliver services previously provided by Government; and encouraging and enabling people to play a more active part in society (Cabinet Office, n.d.).

While still a relatively new policy agenda, the Big Society has been subjected to a series of critiques similar to that of its Third Way predecessor in relation to its narrow, instrumental use of community (e.g. Coote 2010; Kisby 2010; Lawless 2011; Pattie and Johnston 2011; Alcock 2012). Of particular relevance to this paper is that similar appeals to community have been made in environmental and climate change related policy (e.g. HM
Government 2005, DEFRA 2008b; DECC 2009, 2011b), and as such are open to a similar critique. Irrespective of the ideology guiding government, community has been appropriated as a delivery mechanism for policy goals. Rose (1996) describes these processes as forming part of the re-figuring of the territory of government. Community, he argues, has become a site for the administration of individual and collective existence as part of a new form of governmentality that seeks to govern the population at a distance (Foucault 1978, 1982; Rose 1996; Rose et al. 2006; Dean 2010).

A growing, yet still limited literature has examined or commented on the governance of environmental change from a governmentality perspective (e.g. Darier 1996, 1999; Slocum 2004; Oels 2005; Rutherford 2007; Rutland and Aylett 2008; Summerville et al. 2008; Paterson and Stripple 2010). Yet to date no study has been conducted that analyses the role of community in governing pro-environmental behaviour change through the neo-Foucauldian framework of governmentality as detailed in the work of Miller and Rose (1990; Rose and Miller 1992, 2008) and Dean (2010). The value of analysing policy initiatives such as the LCCC through a governmentality lens lies in the fact that it does not seek to answer the question of how effective it was or was not, but rather how it came to be constituted in a particular form as an appropriate response to a problem of government (Rose and Miller 1992). It begins to ask new questions of initiatives aimed at governing environmental change in general, and in this context those using community as a mechanism through which to deliver a government funded carbon governance scheme. To Dean, an analysis of government is:

“concerned with the means of calculation, both qualitative and quantitative, the type of governing authority or agency, the forms of knowledge, techniques and other means employed, the entity to be governed and how it is conceived, the ends sought and the outcomes and consequences”

(Dean 2010, p18)

In particular, it is a study concerned with analysing the specific conditions under which entities such as the LCCC emerge, exist and change. As Barry et al. (1996) observe; a core function of neoliberal political rationality is the redefining of the role and function of the state, with it withdrawing from or reconfiguring certain responsibilities. As highlighted in the previous section, New Labour’s Third Way policy agenda, and its Big Society successor under the current coalition government, have both used appeals to community as a means by which to govern the population at a distance to address a range of perceived social ills.

Governing the population at a distance is the central concept within governmentality (Dean 2010). According to Dean, to govern is ‘to structure the field of possible action, to act on our own or others’ capacities for action’ (Dean 2010, p22). Rose and Miller, drawing on Callon and Latour (Callon and Latour 1981; Callon 1986; Latour 1986), develop the idea of governing at a distance in which an issue is problematised and subject to translation whereby an actor or force:

“is able to require or count upon a particular way of thinking and acting from another, hence assembling them together into a network not because of legal or institutional ties or dependencies, but because they have come to construe their problems in allied ways and their fate as in some way bound up with one another.”

(Rose and Miller 2008, p34)
Of particular relevance here is Dean’s observation that ‘in order to work, governing often concerns the formation of the subjectivities through which it can work’ (Dean 2010, p87). The literature on green governementality has shown how ‘responsible, carbon-calculating individual[s]’ (Rutland and Aylett 2008, p644) or ‘self-regulating, carbon-conscious citizens’ (Paterson and Stripple 2010, p345) have been brought into being in a number of initiatives that aimed to combine saving the planet with saving the individual money (see also Slocum 2004). The key point being that in each case the governmental target of these initiatives was an individual, with an imposed subjectivity based on the carbon-conscious consumer. The key challenge in governing environmental change through community therefore becomes one of imposing a subjectivity through which individuals’ identify themselves as a member of a low carbon community, and alter their behaviour according to its social norms of low(er) carbon living. Yet as Rose observes:

‘…our allegiance to each of these particular communities is something that we have to be made aware of, requiring the work of educators, campaigns, activists, manipulators of symbols, narratives and identifications’

(Rose 1996, p334)

But how, if at all, is such a project possible? And if it is not, what does this tell us about the role of community in governing climate change? They are questions that highlight the importance of analysing projects such as the LCCC through a governmentality lens in order to understand how it came to be constituted as an appropriate response to the challenge of encouraging pro-environmental behaviour change (cf. Rose and Miller 2010), a perspective that is currently missing from the literature.

The Low Carbon Communities Challenge

The Low Carbon Communities Challenge was a two-year, £10m research project organised by the UK Government’s Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) that ran between February 2010 and February 2012. It awarded funding of up to £500,000 to twenty-two winning applicants with the aim of helping:

‘government, local communities and a range of parties involved in the UK transition to greener, low carbon living understand how best to deliver this transition at community level’

(DECC 2009, p1)

Funding was awarded in two stages, with the first ten winners announced in December 2009 and the remainder in February 2010. However in May 2010 a general election was held in the United Kingdom that resulted in the centre-left Labour administration being replaced by a centre-right coalition led by the Conservative Party. The coalition placed a freeze on awarding funding for the second phase of the LCCC while they conducted a broader, Government-wide spending review. The first ten winners had received funding as I began my research, and as such I focussed on this group.

Three winning applicants – Sustainable Blacon in Chester (hereafter ‘Blacon’), the Meadows Partnership in Nottingham (hereafter ‘the Meadows’) and the Muswell Hill Low Carbon Zone (hereafter ‘Muswell Hill’) in London were subsequently chosen as the focus of my research. Blacon is a physically distinct suburb of Chester adjoining the Welsh border in the north-west of England, with a population of around 16,000. The Meadows is a
predominantly residential district of Nottingham that is cut off from neighbouring areas by the River Trent and several major roads with a population of approximately 9,000. Muswell Hill is a suburb in north London, of which the Low Carbon Zone (LCZ) comprised a small area focussed around Muswell Hill Broadway, the main road through the area. A mix of businesses, community buildings, schools and 840 private and council owned residential properties were contained within its boundaries.

Blacon and The Meadows were chosen as they shared similar demographic and geographic characteristics yet utilised very different means of engaging with residents in their respective projects. The Meadows project focussed on the installation of 55 solar PV arrays on a mix of low-income owner-occupied homes, Nottingham City Homes (NCH) managed social housing, local schools and a community garden, while the Blacon project focussed on refurbishing two demonstration houses to showcase low-energy technologies to the Blacon public while simultaneously running a year-long energy awareness project, the Blacon Energy Management Program (BEMP), in which 150 local households participated. The Muswell Hill project was financed by the Greater London Authority’s Low Carbon Zone (LCZ) awards scheme and the LCCC. It combined installation of solar PV arrays on several local buildings such as a church and supermarket with a volunteer-led door knocking project – the Green Home Makeover (GHM) that aimed to encourage residents to install a range of energy efficiency measures in order to decrease their carbon emissions. Common to each project was the discourse of save energy, save money, with an assumption of carbon emission reductions following as a result.

A total of fifty-one individuals were interviewed between March 2010 and January 2012. Of these, ten were DECC officials or advisors, seven were community practitioners responsible for delivering the projects locally, and thirty-four were community members from across the three areas, with numbers split evenly between them. Interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The interview protocols varied according to the stakeholder group being interviewed. For example when interviewing those within DECC the role of community within policy was discussed, while community members were asked questions relating to why they had chosen to participate in the particular schemes and what, if any, changes they had made to their lifestyle as a result. Common to all interviewees was a series of questions relating directly to community, and in particular how they described what they perceived it to be and what it could do.

Data was triangulated based on documentary sources such as applications made to the LCCC, project websites and LCCC progress reports published by DECC. An inductive analysis of the data based on a grounded approach (e.g. Charmaz 2006) was conducted, with community and behaviour change being used as sensitising concepts (Blumer 1969) to draw out themes relevant to this paper.

The Evolving Purpose of the LCCC

Within DECC, the change in Government following the May 2010 general election left the LCCC with an uncertain role:

“What we were testing out with the Low Carbon Community Challenge was a package that included not only what would happen within the community but this big message from government about the need for collective action. It’s all got skewed because, you know, for a long time we don’t know who the government was and then they got a different message which no longer includes particularly that much interest in the Low Carbon Community Challenge.”

(DECC Official)
Labour, with its championing of the Third Way and communitarian politics, was replaced with a conservative led coalition-government introducing a policy agenda based on the ‘Big Society’, and a concomitant shift in the rationality of government from grant-based financing of projects such as the LCCC, to a reliance on private finance initiatives such as the Green Deal. The Green Deal, first announced in August 2010, and officially launched in January 2013, aimed to:

‘combine growth in the economy with a greener and more efficient way of using energy. It aims to reduce energy demand and carbon emissions while making homes warmer, saving consumers money and stimulating green recovery in jobs.’

(Cabinet Office 2010)

The LCCC projects, having been tasked with making themselves relevant to DECC’s policy goals, found themselves in a position where those goals changed mid-way through the project. Similarly, officials responsible for the LCCC within DECC found themselves having to reshape its purpose to fit the new policy agenda. In addition, the role of deputy-head of community-led policy making was removed from DECC’s organisational structure, and the administration and reporting of the LCCC consolidated under the Customer Insight and Engagement team.

While a departmental re-organisation and shift in reporting responsibilities are not in and of themselves enough to suggest a shift in the purpose of the LCCC, there is a clear indication of a change in the rationality of government. In that change, publics are no longer understood as members of a community, but instead become customers, with a resulting shift in how their behaviour is understood. Restating the purpose of the LCCC to reflect the new rationality of government post-election, and written at the mid-point of the programme, the LCCC Interim Report stated:

‘The aim of the LCCC is to test community-scale delivery of low carbon technologies, measures and approaches that will help inform DECC’s key policies and programmes – such as Green Deal and the Smart Meter roll out – as well as contribute to the Department’s wider work around the ‘Big Society’. ’

(DECC 2011a, p3)

This new aim stood in marked contrast to that of its original goal to ‘help government, local communities and a range of parties involved in the UK transition to greener, low carbon living understand how best to deliver this transition at community level’ (DECC 2009, p1). With that change in aim a new series of knowledge claims regarding the purpose of the LCCC were made regarding the ability of community to deliver on a mix of government programs aimed at regulating people, the environment, and markets. Further, it implicitly stressed the need for community to prove themselves against a new set of DECC priorities. As one DECC official described it to me: “that's the nature of voting one government in and one government out” (DECC Official).

Anticipating the post-election change in focus, one of the originators within DECC of the LCCC, in collaboration with colleagues from the community sector, attempted to unite several organisations working on climate change and sustainability issues into a single advocacy network: the Communities and Climate Action Alliance (CCAA). Formed in 2010, the CCAA was an ‘informal grouping of representatives from networks that support grass
roots action’ (CCAA, n.d). It brought together members of community-based organisations taking action on climate change and sustainability issues such as the Transition network, the Low Carbon Communities Network, the Community Energy Practitioners Forum and the Green Communities Network. In a paper under the joint authorship of CCAA members, it stated:

‘It is clear that the speed and scale of society's response to climate change does not yet match the urgency of the threat we face. Many believe, supported by behavioural change theory and practice, that communities can act as powerful agents of change. However to have any significant impact, community action will need to move from the margins to the mainstream. The range of barriers currently facing community action will need to be addressed, in part through more productive partnerships between communities and other key stakeholders like local authorities, the private sector, policy makers, NGOs etc.’

(CCAA 2011, p15)

The paper went on to detail the three principal roles that the CCAA members believed it could play as an advocacy network:

1. To demonstrate to government and other partners communities’ unique and critical role in helping deliver climate change targets
2. To help build a sense of shared purpose and collective action amongst our members and across a range of key private and public sector partners aimed at lowering the barriers to community action on climate change
3. To develop, in collaboration with key partners, a UK wide development plan which plays to partner strengths and which actively enables the potential for community action on climate change.

(CCAA 2011, p15-16)

What is of note is the extent to which an organisation claiming to represent the grassroots presents an agenda closely matching that of Government organisations like DECC that it was purportedly set up to challenge. As an umbrella organisation – a self-styled ‘network of networks’ – it can be inferred that the leaders of its member organisations share similar problem framings of the issue of climate change. It is an example of the successful translation of the problem of carbon management held by the UK government to the community sector. DECC’s interest in maintaining links with CCAA and its partner members can be understood as a means of monitoring and controlling the governance of environmental change at the community-scale. Rather than being a source of political mobilisation against the status quo or sites of grassroots innovations (cf. Seyfang and Smith 2007; Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012), the CCAA was in fact offering itself as a conduit for the delivery of the Government’s programme of carbon management.

The original intention that learning from the LCCC would be shared with community groups and advocacy networks like the CCAA proved not to be the case. The formal evaluation was now to be written for an internal audience within DECC. Those responsible for writing the report were:

‘…now part of the Green Deal consumer insight team, and they have refocused their energies to get as much out of that, because that’s a flagship government project that’s
going to be worth in terms of commercial sector, potentially hundreds of millions of pounds, you know, and getting that right is key.’

(DECC Official)

The evaluation of the LCCC had become a rationalisation of the merits of community as a delivery mechanism for the Green Deal. Having chosen to continue with the LCCC, the evaluation could, in effect, have done little else than reflect this new policy landscape. It is evidence of the ‘more ritual than real’ (Flyvbjerg 1998, p15) nature of evaluations in which the results are a foregone conclusion written to rationalise a prior political decision. Examples of this were evident throughout the Interim Report. For example, under the heading ‘Emerging narratives of engagement – Big Society and creating shared value’, and commenting on ‘the role the LCCC is playing in the development and delivery of policy’ (DECC 2011a, p3), the Interim Report stated:

‘The LCCC communities provide a powerful example of how to build community in pursuit of collective action for mutual benefits. They have the potential to develop as a powerful social movement at the vanguard of change in the complex area of climate change and energy efficiency, uniting local, government and private sector partners. They provide an interesting example of a new location and architecture for redefining the area where government stops and civil society reclaims space. The search for sustainability provides the glue that brings the communities together, locally and potentially nationally.’

(DECC 2011a, p6)

Having redefined the purpose of the LCCC as an aid to policy development around the Green Deal and the Big Society, the climate change and energy efficiency agendas effectively merge (cf. Lovell et al. 2009). Community is conflated with civil society as part of a new social architecture through which the ‘search for sustainability’ may be governed, and new social movements form around ‘the complex area of climate change and energy efficiency’. Social movements can create space for the formation of new identities, explore new ideas and ways of living and devise new solutions to old problems in order to challenge the existing political and social order (Crossley 2002). On that definition, it is immediately clear that social movements are not formed within the invited spaces created by government programs such as the LCCC. The idea of a state-mediated social movement seems at best contradictory, in particular when what the LCCC was offering provided so little in the way of a challenge to the existing framing of the problem of climate change or of the solutions proposed to address it. The Interim Report continues:

‘The LCCC is clearly contributing shared value, engaging, for example, energy companies in tailoring their services to communities in ways that enhance company competitiveness while simultaneously improving both economic and social outcomes. Thus, social and economic progress can be seen to potentially support each other, with government’s role being to ensure the right kind of regulation to encourage companies to invest in long-term value rather than short-term profit. The Big Society project and the search for shared value depend upon the heightened involvement of local communities in designing, developing and managing local services and LCCC provides significant evidence of this.’
Forming part of the official discourse of the LCCC, the Interim Report is placing communities firmly within a regulatory regime through which market mechanisms are seen as agents for positive long-term social and economic change. It presents the shift from a central government grant-funded system, such as the LCCC in its original form, to a market-based system as the appropriate response to the ‘search for sustainability’ at the community level.

At the half-way point of the LCCC the role of community in delivering social benefits is still evident in both the rhetoric of the quote above, and in the reporting of outcomes from a number of LCCC projects. For example:

‘The biggest revelation has been in the feedback from the groups themselves, who more than anything, value the new social connections they are making and which appear to last well beyond the ‘official’ group meetings, with most groups continuing to meet in some form or other. The household and carbon savings, which acted as a hook initially (external motivation) are secondary to what keeps people engaged (intrinsic motivation). We underestimated the desire for human connection!’

The quote formed part of a case study in the Interim Report written by a community practitioner from the Transition Totnes project. It is in many ways quite a depressing realisation that a community project should have underestimated the value of social relations, relegating their motivational power to somewhere behind the all-pervasive, if increasingly questionable, draw of saving money. However the fact that it was included in the Interim Report, along with other examples that highlighted the social benefits of the projects, can be seen as a positive outcome of the LCCC in that it provides evidence of community meaning something more to its members than simply as a way of finding out how to save money on their electricity bill. Yet by the time the final evaluation report for the LCCC was published its purpose had once again been rewritten. No longer was the LCCC about informing ‘key policies and programmes’ such as the Big Society, Green Deal and Smart Meter rollout. Instead, the Low Carbon Communities Challenge Evaluation Report states that:

‘interest in learning from LCCC projects has already been expressed by DECC’s Smart Metering team, the Office for Renewable Energy Deployment (ORED) and the Green Deal’

While in answer to one of the eight key questions the LCCC had sought to answer, ‘Do community solutions enable joined up and integrated deployment of government’s policies and programmes?’ (DECC 2012 p42), the report stated:

‘There is a lack of evidence to fully address this question. However, the experience of the LCCC suggests that projects were attuned to the national policy frameworks and were keen to translate these locally in terms of delivery on the ground. Several projects, for example, provide useful test cases for current DECC policy initiatives including smart meters, Green Deal and the Office for Renewable Energy Delivery.’
Where the interim report presented lengthy case-studies written by community practitioners that highlighted the unexpected positive social outcomes of their projects, the final evaluation report downplayed this aspect. In answering another of the key questions the LCCC sought answers for, namely “What are the wider environmental, social and economic impacts of community delivery?” (DECC 2012, p42) the final evaluation report stated:

‘There is insufficient evidence to determine the wider environmental and economic impacts of community delivery. However, some projects contend that their most positive outcomes have been social.’

What counted as ‘evidence’ for officials within DECC was routinely described as being quantitative in nature, such as the number of tonnes of carbon emissions saved or the number of gigawatts of renewable electricity generated. Therefore taken in conjunction with the warning provided at the beginning of the report that ‘the reader is reminded that outcomes were largely self-reported by the projects themselves’ (DECC 2012, p5), the use of the word ‘contend’ serves to throw doubt on the reality, or relevance of the statement that the most positive outcomes of the projects may have been social. It is presented as a spurious, unsupported claim made by non-experts and is therefore open to doubt. Whether it is true or not is beside the point, and its inclusion serves to reduce the relevance of other sections of the report focussing on social aspects such as the resistance several projects experienced in their communities, and the range of motivations stated for participation such as feeling a sense of belonging to the local area.

The sense of belonging to the local area, described in the final evaluation report as a ‘powerful predictor of engagement’ (DECC 2012, p39), was one of the key themes to emerge from the participant interviews conducted for this research. It is a statement that seems to run counter to an earlier statement in the report stressing the importance of financial savings as a source of motivation for engaging with the projects. However presented in such a way, with the financial motivation presented as the initial hook, with a sense of belonging to the local area as an additional means of encouraging engagement, it is a relatively straightforward leap to read it as a justification for the area-based delivery of energy efficiency measures designed to save carbon-conscious consumer-citizens money.

Of significance to the behaviour change aspects of the LCCC, and echoing the experience of many of the participants interviewed for this research, the potential impacts of family dynamics on behaviour within the household were highlighted, along with evidence of continued ‘maladaptive behaviour’ (Maloney and Ward 1973, p583):

‘There is some tentative evidence…that some of the installed low carbon measures did not necessarily result in lower consumption and/or financial savings…there were some issues - regarding the control panel and general level of instructions - that meant that some of the recipients of air source heat pumps in Chale Green¹ did not ‘get the best’ from the technology (at least not initially). Furthermore, one of the case studies also simply chose to heat the home for longer / to a higher temperature to enjoy the thermal comfort of the new measures, as opposed to the carbon and cost savings.’

¹ Chale Green was another LCCC project area.
The quote suggests that the householders concerned were behaving in an inappropriate manner rather than questioning why they were doing so. Information and financial and carbon savings appear to have been unsuccessful in encouraging behaviour change despite the assumption within most LCCC projects that they should be. Not being able to ‘get the best’ from technology and choosing to enjoy an increase in ‘thermal comfort’ would suggest that an approach that goes beyond information provision alone is required to understand what is going on within the households studied.

The final evaluation report included insights indicating both the potential of community as a means of mobilising individuals to engage in sustainability issues, and the problems at an individual or household level of changing domestic practices. Yet as they were self-reported and hence open to doubt, the extent to which they are able to challenge the dominance of individualising discourses based on save energy, save money is doubtful, particularly given the lack of support within DECC for the LCCC. However hints at the continued relevance to DECC of community as a form of governing at a distance were contained in the statement that several projects were ‘attuned’ to the current policy framework and were ‘keen’ to translate these locally in terms of delivery on the ground. Or, expressed in another way, DECC still sees community as having a potential role in delivering the Green Deal.

Discussion and Conclusions

At its inception, the stated purpose of the LCCC was to ‘help government, local communities and a range of parties involved in the UK transition to greener, low carbon living understand how best to deliver this transition at community level’ (DECC 2009, p1), yet by its conclusion two years later, it had been reduced to being of ‘interest’ to certain departments within DECC who could ‘learn from community-scale approaches to the delivery of low carbon technologies and engagement activities’ (DECC 2012, p2). The goal of the first – to gain an understanding of how to transition to low carbon living – is a long way from the goal of the second – delivering low carbon technologies. While still taking an instrumental understanding of community as a means by which to deliver the transition to low-carbon living there is an implicit acknowledgement within the original goals of the LCCC that what is involved is a social process. This view of community was constantly repeated in interviews with members of the expert network. Yet by the time the final evaluation report was written the role of the social had been largely removed, replaced by an even more instrumental understanding of community as a scale through which to deliver low-carbon technology. Economic incentives of saving money and appealing to investors and technological solutions based on improving carbon-efficiency are central components of this approach to governing environmental change. It is the carbon-conscious consumer-citizen who must change, not the centralised, fossil-fuel based energy system that DECC is also charged with governing.

This framing was evident in each of the three areas studied, with the save energy save money discourse and technological solutions designed to work within existing systems of provision to provide energy efficiency improvements dominating. However two key issues remain with this problem framing. First, framing the problem as one for individuals to solve does little or nothing to challenge the much broader issue of the neoliberal ordering of society, in which governments and corporations interact in such a way that the imperative of continued economic growth continues to usurp that of protecting the environment. Second, doubts need to be raised over the ability of community to act as a vehicle for the delivery of positive environmental change at the individual level. While community may be able to
deliver energy efficiency measures of varying sizes and scales, ranging from water-flow restrictors as in Muswell Hill through to solar PV arrays as in the Meadows, there is little to indicate that change towards low(er) carbon living necessarily followed, or will follow as a result of similar efforts in the future. Delivering low carbon technologies does not automatically equate to delivering low carbon living, whatever the delivery mechanism.

But where does this leave community? I would argue it leaves it with a limited role. As a delivery mechanism it can have some effect – as evidenced in the Meadows and Muswell Hill LCZ projects. There is no doubt that based on a geographical interpretation of community it can play a role in getting energy efficiency technologies on, or into, people’s homes. Where community is likely to fail, or have limited effect, is in facilitating behavioural change within the home. Low carbon living was not an organising principal or interest around which participants’ ideas on community were formed in the same way as, for example, intentional communities such as Brithdir Mawr in Wales or those of the Global Ecovillage Network (cf. Healy 2003; Horton 2003; Hatton 2008). Governing through community in this context fails because it is much more difficult to draw into existence a ‘low carbon community’ in the same way you can with, for example, ‘the gay community’ (cf. Rose 1999). Attempting to do so relies on individuals identifying themselves through the imposed subjectivity of the carbon-conscious consumer citizen, and modifying their behaviour accordingly. More problematically for programmes of government such as the LCCC, the carbon-conscious consumer-citizen is quite capable of rationalising their ‘maladaptive behaviour’ (Maloney and Ward 1973, p583) in ways that suggest the individual is the wrong focus of such programmes to begin with (cf. Hobson 2002). This suggests an approach drawing on a wider analytical lens than that offered by rationalist and social-psychological approaches to understanding human behaviour, such as that offered by social practice theory, may be useful. Social practice theory implicitly acknowledges the social construction of practices, the role of collective learning, and the importance of the exercise of power in shaping and defining justifiable conduct (Warde 2005). It therefore offers a more comprehensive analytical lens through which to examine why the apparent anomaly of people not responding ‘correctly’ to the information provided or technology installed occurred. However the governmentality lens through which this paper has analysed the LCCC would suggest that such a change in approach is unlikely as it would draw attention to a number of ‘inconvenient facts about how such programs present themselves and their objectives and strategic effects’ (Dean 2010, p87).

Rather than helping ‘a range of parties involved in the UK transition to greener, low carbon living understand how best to deliver this transition at community level’ (DECC, 2009), this paper has highlighted the increasing instrumentality of community within the LCCC in which the role of the social as a mechanism of change was gradually removed. By presenting a genealogy of the LCCC from inception to final evaluation report, the paper traced the decreasing interest within DECC in the role of community as anything other than a delivery-mechanism for low-carbon technology. The LCCC incorporated the dominant policy approach to governing environmental change that focuses on small scale behaviour change and the delivery of technological fixes aimed at improving carbon efficiency to passive consumer-citizens. Firmly rooted in individualist understandings of the governance of environmental change, such an approach does little to challenge existing social practices or patterns of normal behaviour. Within the framing of the LCCC, community offered little different to that which has gone before in encouraging, or governing, low(er) carbon lifestyles. As such, I would argue, the LCCC offered little evidence – for or against – of the ability of community to tackle climate change.
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References


