

CIE-MAP

Centre for Industrial Energy, Materials and Products

Resource Efficiency and the Circular Economy: What do the public think?

Main findings

- » The public are willing and able to engage with debate around which aspects of resource efficiency should be fostered.
- » People wanted to see a resource efficient future that protects the environment, the economy, and product quality.
- » Many resource efficiency strategies, such as reducing packaging, increasing product repairability and longevity, and extending producer responsibility are already popular.
- » Shared social values, such as fairness, trust, convenience, affordability and autonomy influence these preferences.



Why does public engagement matter?

Many different resource efficiency strategies are currently being promoted as part of the circular economy and a wider agenda to minimise waste and resource use, and reduce associated consumption-based energy use.

Examples include encouraging: design for reuse, repair and recycling; product repair and maintenance services; sharing, swapping and gifting of products; enabling service provision over ownership; reduced, recyclable and biodegradable packaging; extended producer responsibility e.g. warranties, incentivised return and remanufacturing; and carbon taxation schemes.

While the public will need to play a key role in the uptake of these strategies, the possibilities for achieving mainstream acceptance are often seen to be low, with negative public opinion cited as one reason preventing implementation. However, this is often based primarily on assumptions about what people think rather than solid empirical evidence surrounding the public acceptability of such schemes.

One way of gathering such evidence is through public engagement that aims to identify key points of acceptance and contestation that can influence policy and society in an open and democratic way.

Previous research has found that people are fully able and interested in engaging with complex debate and decision making around energy issues. An ongoing process of engagement is thus needed in order to accommodate public preferences and values surrounding which aspects of a circular economy should, and should not, be fostered.

To begin to answer these questions, we conducted four two-day workshops in England and Wales, exploring how members of the public perceive a range of different resource efficiency strategies.

What matters to people?



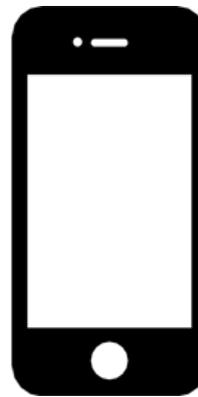
Environment:

A system that supports sustainable consumption of resources and reduces waste.



Economy:

A system that develops a strong and ethical economy that protects jobs and livelihoods.



Products:

A system that provides quality, long-lasting, repairable and recyclable products.

CIE-MAP research found that in general people supported a transition towards a more sustainable, resource efficient, and circular economy.

Participants recognised the need for change, highlighting three key elements of a desirable future system.

Public preferences for different resource efficiency strategies

Although personal opinions varied, when examples of specific strategies were provided, some strategies were currently more popular than others:

Already Popular

Design for reuse, repair and recycling:

There were strong concerns around a perceived increase in inbuilt product obsolescence and associated decrease in product lifetimes. Participants were very positive about redesigning products to make them more durable, repairable and/or modular. Key caveats focused on desire to maintain affordability and product choice.

Product repair and maintenance services:

Building on concerns about product lifetimes, participants were positive about this strategy. Many wanted to see product repair become more affordable and convenient, to make it worthwhile and easy to repair rather than replace a product.

Sharing, swapping and gifting of products:

Generally a popular strategy, this was seen to lead to many positive outcomes, including: strengthening local communities and personal relationships; increasing access to otherwise unaffordable products; and making more effective use of products. Practical concerns focused on convenience (time, effort, location) and maintaining the safety and hygiene of shared products.

Reduced, recyclable and biodegradable packaging:

With strong feelings regarding the wastefulness of existing packaging, this strategy was extremely popular. Some participants called for increased standards and regulations that producers would have to meet.



Extended producer responsibility:

Building on concerns about decreasing product lifetimes, participants were positive about extended warranty, incentivised return and remanufacturing schemes. Many wanted to see businesses take more responsibility for products they produce and sell. Key caveats were focused on the convenience of repair and return. However, distrust in business led many to assume that vested interests would prevent or subvert schemes in the interest of profit.

Currently Controversial

Product service systems:

Whilst some were positive about increasing producer responsibility for product repair, many were unwilling to consider service provision as a means of achieving this. Distrust in business and contracts led to strong concerns about 1) the distribution of responsibility for product condition and damage, and 2) the financial risks of being locked into contracts for everyday products.

Carbon taxes:

Carbon/material based taxes (described as replacing VAT) were the most controversial strategy discussed. Some felt taxation was a fair option (as it maintained greater freedom of choice) and might lead to more green products becoming affordable. Others criticised it for maintaining societal inequality (as well off individuals would continue consuming as now), as well as raising concerns surrounding the fair governance of such schemes.



Conditions for acceptance: The underlying values that influence public preferences

Fairness and responsibility: The fair and upfront distribution of resources and responsibilities

Trust and accountability: Trustworthy and honest interactions with government, business and other citizens

Affordability and costs: Financial security and stability, with products that are affordable to all

Convenience and hassle: Products and services that are convenient (time and effort) and work with everyday life and practices

Personal freedom and choice: Personal autonomy in everyday lives, including choice and control over products and services

Community and social connection: Development of strong communities, providing communal resources, protecting privacy and tackling loneliness and isolation

Safety and hygiene: Appropriate innovation, that ensures products and services are safe and hygienic to use



What's needed now? Conclusions and recommendations

- » The public are willing and able to engage with debate around which aspects of resource efficiency should be fostered. Governments and businesses should work meaningfully with the public and create opportunities for engagement at all stages of the process.
- » The public want to see a shift towards a more resource efficient economy that protects the environment, jobs and product quality. Meeting these criteria is the first step towards improving the acceptability of any specific resource efficiency strategy.
- » Public preferences for resource efficiency strategies are conditional on the shared social values that underpin them. These include: fairness, trust, convenience, affordability, autonomy, community and safety.
- » Businesses and Governments should be guided by these values when developing innovative resource efficient and circular business models and initiatives. As these new models develop they should be tested in this way to improve the chances of successful public uptake.

References

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CIE-MAP

Working closely with government and industry, CIE-MAP conducts research to identify all the opportunities along the product supply chain that ultimately deliver a reduction in industrial energy use.

CIE-MAP brings together the four leading UK universities of Bath, Cardiff, Leeds and Nottingham Trent with a range of expertise in engineering, economics, psychology, design, political science and governance. This work was supported by the Research Councils UK (RCUK) Energy Programme's funding for the Centre for Industrial Energy, Materials and Products (CIE-MAP), grant reference EP/N022645/1.

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