

Research report into

Engaging with low-carbon energy options and advice

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energy
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trust

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About RiDC

RiDC is the leading expert in inclusive research involving disabled consumers. We are an independent, national charity with over 50 years of experience in consumer research and insight in this specialist area.

It's the only type of research we do.

We are run by, and for, people with a personal experience of disability.

We always start from the perspective of disabled and older consumers.

By working with disabled and older people, listening to their needs, and reflecting on their experiences, we make sure nobody is excluded, and the insights we gather are grounded in real life.

RiDC was one of the first organisations to establish a UK panel of disabled and older consumers. Our panel includes over 4,000 people and is the most extensive pan-disability panel in the UK.

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Executive summary

This research investigates the experiences of disabled people when engaging with media campaigns designed to encourage people to make sustainable low-carbon energy choices.

This research theme was identified by RiDC's consumer panel¹ as an area they wished to explore and formed part of the participatory research strand from year two of the **Enabling Inclusive Innovation and Sustainable Choice** research programme, funded by the Energy Savings Trust².

There were three main elements to this strand of work:

- Survey exploring de-carbonisation in the home.
- Three focus group workshops to explore possible year two research themes.
- Two research themes were selected and explored:
 1. Investigating disabled people's engagement with low-carbon energy options and advice
 2. Participatory design research investigating energy use of assistive technology in the home.

This report covers the findings from Theme 1.

The research outputs from Theme 1 are twofold: a research report and consumer guidance, both published on the RiDC website (www.ridc.org.uk). A stakeholder workshop has been organised for Autumn 2023 to maximise the impact of our findings and help make change happen.

¹ <https://www.ridc.org.uk/our-panel>

² <https://energysavingtrust.org.uk/>

Main findings

There are three key findings which can be drawn from the research. Campaigns and online advice seeking public engagement with low-carbon energy options and advice often:

- 1. Do not use inclusive and meaningful language or provide actionable solutions.**

The language used and advice given does not always consider the realities of the disabled peoples' lives.

- 2. Discourages engagement.**

Where the relevance of information and advice is not applicable to disabled people, it can lead to feelings of stigmatisation, exclusion, and disengagement.

- 3. Do not help disabled people make suitable low-carbon energy choices.**

Without tailored solutions there is the risk of inappropriate choices being made that could have impact on disabled peoples' health and finance.

Main recommendations

A greater awareness of the barriers that disabled people encounter when engaging with media campaigns about low-carbon energy use will help provide with more relevant information and actionable solutions. Below we propose ways in which some of the problems identified can be mitigated to make these campaigns more inclusive.

- Include disabled people in the design process of engagement campaigns from the very beginning.
- Recognise that disabled people will often have a larger carbon footprint than the national average.
- Consider the living situation of many disabled people and how that might impact any advice given.
- Consider the potential difficulties some disabled people have with making medium term investments.
- Be mindful of the impact of disability on the suitability of choice(s).

Background

This research study is part of a broader RiDC research programme investigating whether disabled and older consumers can easily access and use low carbon energy products and services. The research programme, **Enabling Inclusive Innovation and Sustainable Choice** is funded by the Energy Savings Trust under the Energy Redress Scheme Round 11 (Innovation). The programme is being led by RiDC and delivered in partnership with Energy Systems Catapult (Living Lab).

This research is a result of asking the 4,000 strong RiDC consumer panel what area of decarbonisation they would like RiDC to research in year two of the programme. The results from approaching our panel have shaped two research strands, this first strand being reported in this document,

‘Investigating disabled people’s engagement with low-carbon energy options and advice.’

and the second...

‘Participatory design research investigating energy use of assistive technology in the home.’

being reported separately.

How did we identify these topics? Our approach to this research (Figure 1), was to have the topic area directly informed from the RiDC consumer panel. To achieve this, we asked members to complete a short survey about what their decarbonisation priorities and concerns were in the home. After a number of potential topic areas were identified from the survey of 750 responses, we identified three topic areas (listed below) to further explore across three focus groups with separate impairments in each focus group (Sensory, Physical, Cognitive).

- 1. Understanding the energy use and cost of assistive equipment.**

Aim: to gain a greater understanding of assistive technology energy use (and cost) at a device level.

2. Low energy choices about the kitchen.

Aim: To investigate the suitability for disabled people and their carers of low carbon/ energy home devices such as microwaves, slow cookers, and air fryers.

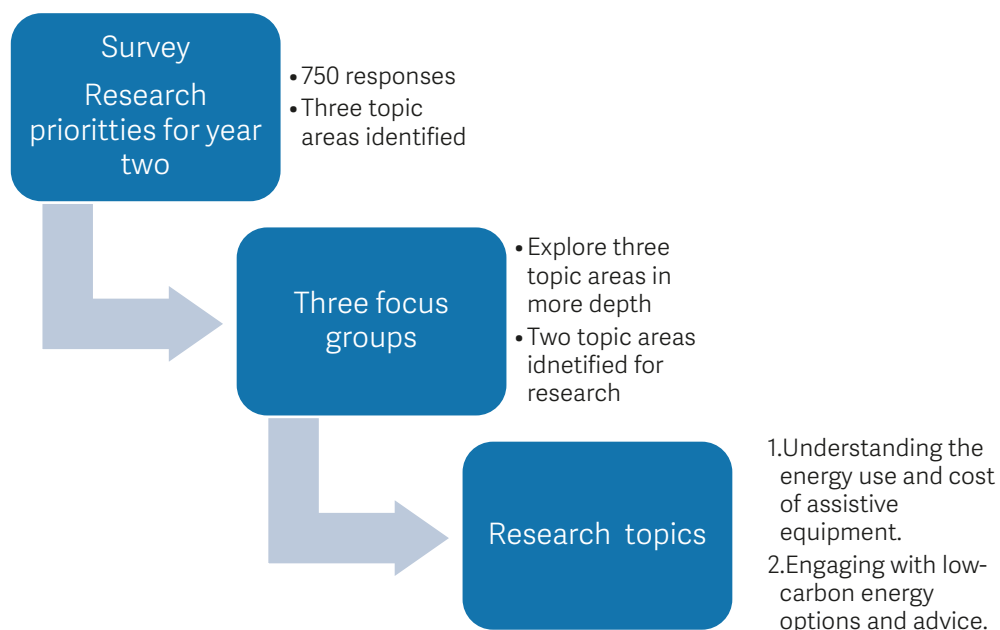
3. Engaging with low-carbon energy options and advice.

Aim: to investigate if government and industry efforts to encourage the people to choose low carbon options through information campaigns and online tools are meaningful for disabled people

The discussions and insight gained during these focus groups were reviewed in the light of the previous data collected under the 'Enabling Inclusive Innovation and Sustainable Choice' research programme, to see if they resonated with earlier findings.

The two topics chosen for further research were, 'Understanding the energy use and cost of assistive technology' and, 'Engaging with low carbon/ sustainable energy choices.' This document reports on desk work and a further three focus group sessions that further explores the 'Engaging with low-carbon energy options and advice' strand of work.

Figure 1. Participatory research flow



Making change happen – advice and nudges.

Our previous research within the ‘Enabling Inclusive Innovation and Sustainable Choice’ research programme, as well as earlier work on electric vehicle charging points³, both highlight the barriers that disabled people encounter when trying to make purchasing choices which are good for the environment. These barriers leave many people frustrated and excluded from making a positive contribution towards reducing their carbon footprint.

During desk research, we also found an increasing number of online tools available for people to review their energy use both in the home and more holistically when out and about. These tools offer advice on suitable purchases to reduce energy use and suggest changes to behaviour which could have a positive impact with reducing a person’s carbon footprint. Further to this there have been television and advertising campaigns by both government and industry using nudge theory to support positive behavioural change.

It is with this in mind, that the ‘Engaging with low carbon/sustainable energy choices’ research theme was taken to explore the barriers to engagement by disabled people with information and advice towards low carbon energy options.

It should be noted that existing public awareness campaign advice to reduce energy use in the home is not well received by the majority of disabled people. Measures such as turning down heating or installing LED lights are either already being taken or cannot be done because of health or property ownership reasons.

Research questions

This work is centred around the following research questions:

1. Do disabled people feel excluded from engaging with low carbon energy advice?

³ <https://www.ridc.org.uk/transport/going-electric>

2. What are the barriers for disabled people when engaging with carbon footprint reduction advice?
3. How can online tools and national campaigns, designed to engage people in the carbon reduction and sustainable futures agenda, be made more inclusive and relevant to disabled people?
4. How can industry ensure that recommendations are realistic and reasonable for disabled people to implement?

Methodology

Overview

A challenge with this project is to find a way to discuss behavioural change and low carbon energy choices whilst acknowledging the limitations and applicability of some of the advice given. This is important so as not to further isolate the focus group participants as a group who are not willing to, as opposed to not being able to engage with any energy saving advice given.

Our approach was to ask RiDC's consumer panel ⁴ members to complete an online carbon footprint calculator from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). Once finished they were asked to reflect on their experience and answer some further questions in a survey, the data from which was used to help facilitate discussions in three focus groups held shortly afterwards. The choice of a not-for-profit calculator was to minimise any feelings of being told what to do by the government which we hoped would facilitate a more open and holistic discussion.

World Wildlife Fund Carbon footprint calculator⁵

This online calculator asked questions about four sections - Food, Travel, Home, Stuff (consumables). Depending on the answers given within each section, a representation of the respondent's carbon footprint is given alongside comparisons with the average carbon footprint for the whole of the UK and the World.

A breakdown of the footprint is provided by the four sections and advice given on how to reduce the footprint in these areas of Home, Food, Travel and Stuff.

It should be noted that in choosing to use the WWF calculator we were not critiquing its functionality or design, which was found to be helpful in giving

⁴ <https://www.ridc.org.uk/our-panel>

⁵ <https://footprint.wwf.org.uk/>

an overview of a person's carbon footprint. Moreover, we used the online carbon calculator as a probe to explore how such tools and advice might be made more relevant and meaningful to disabled people.

Focus group work

Overview

Three online focus groups were held over Zoom at the beginning of October 2023 and were facilitated by a RiDC researcher. Another RiDC researcher observed the session with their camera turned off and took notes in the background.

The focus groups lasted a total of approximately 90 minutes. They were split into two sessions, each of approximately 30 minutes. They started with a ten-minute familiarisation period to introduce the members of the group to each other and to say a little about their home situation and any impairment (if they wished to) and included a 10-minute comfort break in the middle. These sessions were video recorded and transcribed to support a thematic analysis undertaken across all three meetings. All participants received a thank you payment for their contribution to the project.

Participants

The 15 participants were selected by indicating an interest in participation during the participatory research focus group work of this project which identify research themes for us to explore. We supplemented this list with people who had expressed an interest in this topic in the initial scoping survey.

All participants came from RiDC's consumer panel, and their names are replaced by pseudonyms in this report. Details of their impairment and living situation can be found in Appendix 1. Participant details

Pre-task

Prior to the focus group work, instructions were sent to the participants to complete the WWF online carbon footprint calculator and record their thoughts about the questions asked, the advice given, and the overall process, on an online survey administered through Qualtrics (an experience management software platform).

Online focus groups

On completion of the pre-task, the participants' answers were reviewed by the research team and used to facilitate group reflection about the questions asked and advice given in the carbon footprint tool.

During the focus groups, we aimed to understand whether the participants found the questions and advice given by the carbon footprint tool inclusive, meaningful, and/or actionable.:

To do this, we developed a topic guide which included questions and prompts to guide the discussion and explore the following topics:

Session 1 (accessibility and relevance) – The questions for a section (Food, Travel, Home, Stuff) of the calculator were read to the group and each participant was invited to discuss what they thought about them. They were prompted to reflect on whether or not they felt that their situation and impairment(s) were taken into account and to say what could have helped to be more relevant to their situation.

Session 2 (meaningful and actionable engagement) – Participants were asked about their carbon footprint results which were generated by the calculator and if they felt the comparative representations were useful to them.

The advice provided to help reduce their carbon footprint within the four sections (Food, Travel, Home, Stuff) was discussed and any barriers to following this was explored.

Finally, a discussion was facilitated about how such tools (or other behavioural change engagement methods such as advertising campaigns), could be designed better to be more applicable to disabled people.

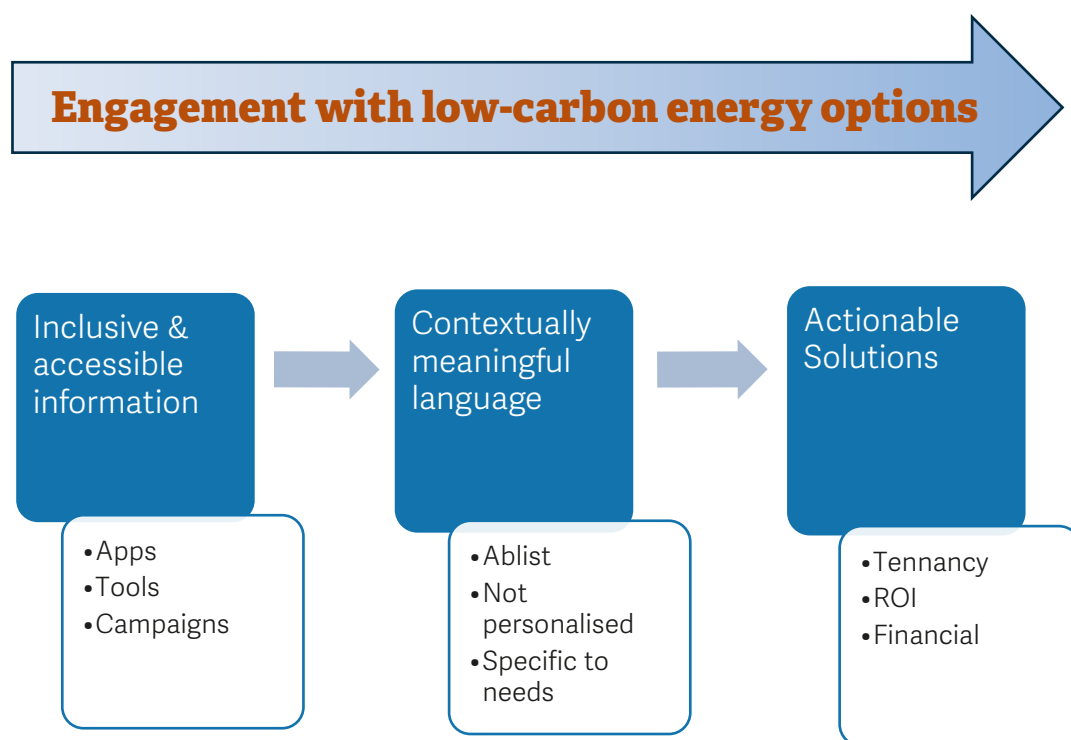
Findings

Overview

In this section we report on the thematically analysed combined results from all three focus groups. Figure 2 represents an overview of our findings and identifies where barriers exist for disabled people wanting to engage with low-carbon energy options and advice. Without these barriers to engagement being addressed we found our participants are being left with feelings of exclusion and disengagement.

“That could literally mean that people say, oh, do you know what? I'm not even going to bother buying another light bulb that's energy efficient or LED because it doesn't seem to make a difference ... but you know, people have got to feel like the time they have spent engaging has been worthwhile [and] has meaning to them.” _Harriot

Figure 2 Representation of potential barriers to engagement with low-carbon options and advice for disabled people.



Inclusive and accessible information

This study focused on the information asked for, and advice given whilst completing the carbon footprint calculator, and not the accessibility of the online tool itself. Poor accessibility of online tools is a well-documented barrier to engagement by disabled people and is comprehensively covered by WCAG 2.2 guidelines.

Contextually meaningful language

Whilst completing the questions in the online tool our participants were frustrated in the following aspects:

1. Being relevant to their situation.
2. Understanding disability.
3. Generalisations and inclusivity.
4. Wanting to give context to selected answers.

Finding relevant answers

Where questions provided a closed list of answer options there is a need to acknowledge options that disabled people might select and not assume that the options provided covers everyone.

This was most noticeable in the travel section where the following question were asked...

Q1. 'What kind of vehicle do you travel in most often as driver or passenger? (if any)'

Answer options. Car; Motorbike; Neither – I walk cycle or use public transport for all my journeys.

In answering this question some of our participants wanted to see options about their modes of transport i.e., Electric wheelchair or Mobility scooter.

“It doesn't cover people [like me], I need to use a mobility scooter and to go locally [and] if I'm traveling any distance, I'm fortunate enough to have a wheelchair accessible vehicle WAV and put my scooter in the back.” _Henry

Whilst in the home section, the questions asked do not reflect the situation of many disabled people who live in rented homes where they have no control over low carbon energy options. The consequence of not having energy efficiency improvements about the home will impact negatively on their carbon footprint.

Q8. Which of these home energy efficiency improvements are installed in your home?

Answer options. Energy saving lightbulbs; Loft insulation; Cavity or solid wall insulation; Condensing boiler; Double glazing; Low flow fitting to taps and showers; Solar panels; Solar water heating.

“There weren't enough options to cover what I wanted to see because some of the answers I gave to these questions were, through circumstances, made me look as if I was, you know, not caring about my carbon footprint. But when in actual fact, the answer I wanted wasn't there.” _Zoe

Understanding disability

Many disabled people have good and bad days as a result of their impairment(s). This can affect their daily routines and behaviours quite significantly. This variability means that answering questions about behaviours over time periods such as, “How many hours a week do you spend in your car, or home, or ... ” or “In a week how many times do you visit a restaurant, or cinema, or...”, are problematic. For many disabled people there is no typical week to help inform this type of question.

“What is a typical month, one month I'm in hospital and another month I'm not... I don't know from day

to day what I am doing, I can't because my health doesn't let me . So how am I supposed to put a number to a question?" _Isabel

Ableism

Our participants found elements of the carbon footprint tool to be ableist. For example, some multiple-choice questions did not offer meaningful or relevant response options for disabled people, and others only offered options which were not achievable for some disabled people.

"To me, those questions were aimed at able bodied people... you are pushed into one of those boxes, it doesn't say why do you not ride a bike? Is it because of a disability or is it because of a choice?" _Isabel

Generalisations and inclusivity

In designing tools for the general population to use to calculate an individual's carbon footprint, assumptions will inevitably have to be made. These may include the types of transport people use or the ease at which someone can calculate their average use of transport or electricity.

These assumptions help limit the number of questions and possible responses that needs to be asked to support the carbon footprint algorithm and make the survey more manageable for the respondent. To do this, designers will hope to capture 80% of the population with 20% of relevant questions and responses.

To be relevant to the last 20% of the population, which is where many disabled people exist, there would need to be a substantial increase in the number of questions and response options.

I feel like there weren't enough options to cover what I wanted to see because some of the answers I gave to these questions were through circumstances that made me look as if I was, you know, not caring about my carbon footprint. But when in actual fact, the answer I wanted wasn't there. _Zoe

Wanting to give context to selected responses

Our participants wanted to add context to their answers, especially where they thought their answers were going to contribute negatively to their carbon footprint.

There are many areas of energy use which disabled people have little or no control over. Heating rooms, charging wheelchairs, powering adjustable beds are just a few examples where if asked, many people would say they have no choice and have to do this.

“[We have] no choice about how warm we keep the house, how much energy we use, how much heating we use. For us, it's also an awful lot of washing and tumble drying as well because we've got no choice.”
_Natalie

Our participants felt there should be some recognition of this when asking questions about energy use.

“I think disabilities were just not taken into account at all. I've got a stairlift and it's always on charge, there's nothing I can do about that. It's always on charge, I can't change that. Again, with a mobility scooter, although mine isn't on charge at the moment because it needs new batteries. I have a fall alarm because I'm a fall risk and that system is plugged in and that again is always on. I, can't do anything about that either.” _Nicole

Actionable solutions

After completing the online survey, a representation of the participants' carbon footprint was given in terms of tonnes (of CO2 equivalent) and compared to the UK and world average for the year.

The carbon footprint was broken down by percentages of the total carbon footprint across the four sections (Home, Food, Travel, Stuff) and advice provided on how to reduce this score. The following are the main concerns identified by the participants when considering the advice given.

The carbon footprint of disability

All of the participants felt that in many cases they did not have a choice to take low-carbon options either about the home or whilst out and about.

For example, for some disabled people the washing machine is a vital part of their hygiene routine. Reducing the number of washes or lowering the temperature of the wash causes concern.

"I have a urostomy stoma. So, a lot of my clothes get urine on them because of the urostomy stoma. I'm not gonna wash something that's got urine stain stuff on in at 35-degree wash." _Isabel

and...

"When you've got someone in the house with incontinence issues, you know, washing bed sheets and things is a very frequent thing." _Natalie

Additionally, many disabled people spend a lot of their time at home which can have a significant impact on their carbon footprint. Low house temperatures can exasperate many health conditions, so keeping warm at home becomes a necessity in keeping healthy. In addition to this, energy will be used in the home for stairlifts, adjustable beds and chairs, air purifiers, medical equipment, entertainment, and cooking devices.

“A lot of disabled people will spend all of their time at home. So their heating is through the roof. Two people at home 24 hours a day, you're gonna have to spend a lot of money on heating electricity be it the kettle or be it the telly, whatever.” _Harry

Our participants also highlighted the need to have contingency to guard against failure of key items, such as having to keep batteries charged for power cuts or having a spare set of clothing available (which will need washing). This planning and contingency that disabled people do in many aspects of their lives will have a negative impact on their carbon footprint.

“For example, you've got batteries to help keep the electricity on that could save you like a trip to hospital. Yes, you've got the carbon of the batteries, but then are you saving the carbon of like an ambulance coming out, taking you to and from hospital, relatives coming to visit you and whatever. It's kind of like you're putting something in place to prevent something worse from happening” _Nathan

Home ownership and cost

Much of the advice to reduce carbon footprint about the home relies on having the authority to make changes such as installing heat pumps, loft or cavity-wall insulation, solar panels, and such like. Disabled people are more likely to live as tenants and will not be able to make those sorts of changes without having the commitment of the landlord.

“If you're a disabled person, you're more likely to be on a low income like myself, I feel like, you know, you're, you're more likely to have to purchase fast fashion because that's what you can afford. You're less likely to be able to compost because you might not have a garden because you live in a flat, you know, you're less likely to have energy efficiency stuff in your home because that's up to the landlord

to put in if you can only do that if you own your own home.” _Nathan

Where disabled people are able to make low carbon energy options there are further complications in understanding how the installation and running impacts their lives⁶.

“If I'm going to have a new heating system put in, I don't know whether it's a ground source or a heat source pump. How long will that take? What's the implication for me as a disabled person? What is likely is I'm going to have to arrange to be away for two or three days.” _Harry

Technology solutions

The use of how smart technologies about the home that could help with energy saving was discussed. Although many disabled people use smart speakers (Alexa, Google Assistant, Apple's Siri) and have smart meters, there are still some people who are worried about the cost and unsure how they might help them make energy savings.

“It makes a huge assumption, doesn't it, that you've got the money to spend on the technology and be capable of using the technology. I don't have any smart devices in my house at the moment. I just, I would love to have that but it's not my house. Although I believe my energy company are installing smart meter for me, but they're not for me, they're for them. I wouldn't know how to start using them. Changing energy companies is so impractical. I'm already with the cheapest and best option I can be with. I don't know that relying on bringing another, another energy burning smart device in my house is going to save me any money... I don't know that a meter telling me or a device telling me that I've used

⁶ <https://www.ridc.org.uk/content/research-and-consultancy/our-insights/sustainable-energy/sustainable-energy-reports>

X amount of kilowatts of energy today on this or that will help me.” _ZOE

Wanting to engage

A clear message from our participants is that they want to engage with reducing their carbon footprint. However, because of the many barriers disabled people encounter with information and advice not being relevant to them, engagement becomes more difficult than it should be and can lead to feelings of being stigmatised and disengagement.

“It does make you feel guilty. It does get you down because you're thinking, well, I can't help it, but I'm being compared to the average person, to the average person who is fit and healthy” _Isabel

and...

“I feel really agitated. There are enough exclusions as it is without adding to it and adding to the pressure that you now feel to comply and be part of, be part of the community, but only if you do these things.” _Nicole

Involving disabled people in the design of information and advice about low-carbon options was repeated by many of the participants.

“Designing something, actually getting a group of people with different conditions and different disabilities, to find out how they can do it.” _Ella

One straight forward approach was implied by Alice...

“It's not asking you if you are disabled” _Alice

Discussion

Inclusion and engagement

This research topic was chosen by members of the RiDC consumer panel and was recognised as a potentially sensitive area to study. Feedback from earlier studies in this research programme showed people being annoyed with being told to make changes to their lives which had the potential to negatively impact their health. They also pointed out that many disabled people had small incomes and lived in rented properties, which would limit much of what they could do to affect change at home.

However, there was also a desire to contribute to a more sustainable future. It was with this in mind that we chose the WWF online carbon calculator (it being a platform from a positive organisation) for a sensitive conversation. It was never meant to be a critique of the calculator itself which was found to be helpful but of limited use to many disabled people.

One of the ways the government has been responding to the global environmental challenges of the 21st century is by encouraging the population to make behavioural changes about their use of energy both in the home and whilst out and about. Government, utility suppliers and environmentalist have all spent money on media campaigns to promote choices which are more mindful and less wasteful of our energy use.

Our research has shown that if these campaigns are not designed sympathetically to the reality of many disabled people's lives and the language and advice is not inclusive, then the effect will be to marginalise this significant portion of the population⁷.

A feature of disability is the broadness of how it can impact to people's lives. This broadness coupled with the changeability of many impairments makes the design of engagement tools and methods challenging. However, these variables need to be considered if meaningful engagement

and actionable solutions are to be found. The following are some key pointers which can be taken from this research to help guide more inclusive future engagements:

- Include disabled people in the design process of engagement campaigns from the very beginning.
- Recognise that disabled people will often have a larger carbon footprint than the national average.
- Consider the living situation of many disabled people and how that might impact any advice given.
- Consider the potential difficulties some disabled people have with making medium term investments.
- Be mindful of the impact of disability on the suitability of choice(s).

Achieving change

A key strategic priority for RiDC is to ensure that disabled people can make sustainable choices and easily access and use low carbon products and services. This is the research objective of our over-arching research programme '**Enabling Inclusive Innovation and Sustainable Choice**' in which this research study into engaging with low-carbon energy options and advice sits.

This work is informed from previous research outputs from the 'Enabling Inclusive Innovation and Sustainable Choice' research programme carried out by RiDC, which looked at, alternative home heating and energy sources⁸, and getting an electric vehicle home charger⁹.

This research has identified some of the frustrations encountered by our research participants when engaging with national campaigns to make more sustainable low-carbon energy choices and provides some recommendations for potential solutions.

To further support and achieve change we will be sharing and discussing our research findings widely with key stakeholders and through mainstream, trade and social media. We will also be promoting online consumer information, based on our research findings and published at www.ridc.org.uk.

Finally, we will be convening a stakeholder workshop event in Autumn 2023 to develop awareness and help deliver the necessary changes.

Key stakeholder groups

There are a large number and range of private, public and consumer stakeholders involved in the delivery of the low carbon, sustainable energy agenda within the UK. These include:

⁸ <https://www.ridc.org.uk/news/what-alternative-options-alternative-home-heating-and-energy-sources>

⁹ <https://www.ridc.org.uk/features-reviews/out-and-about/electric-cars/getting-electric-vehicle-home-charger>

- Government legislators & policy makers (e.g., Department of Energy Security and Net Zero; Ofgem)
- Environmental charities (e.g., Centre for Sustainable Energy, WWF, Friends of the Earth)
- Energy providers (e.g., Octopus; E.ON; UKPN)
- Trade associations and bodies (e.g., Beama.org.uk; REAL (Renewable energy assurance Ltd); Energy UK; Renewable Energy Association, Sustainable Energy Association)
- Consumer information providers (e.g., Which; Energy Savings Trust)
- Landlords and property freeholders (public and private)

Appendix 1. Participant details

Table 1: Focus Group 1

Name	Impairment	Home details
Harriot	Neurological needs, energy issues sensitivities to noise and light,	Living alone, owns home
Alice	Physical, wheelchair user, assistance dog,	Living alone, has assistance dog and pets
Nicole	Neurological, fatigue, brain fog, numbness. Electric scooter user	Living with partner, own home.

Table 2: Focus Group 2

Name	Impairment	Home details
Nathan	Wheelchair user energy condition	No details about his home. Does have solar panels
Harry	MS, wheelchair user	Was living in social housing until recently, moving to own home allowed for solar panels
Isabel	Wheelchair user, spinal tumours, dexterity, concentration	Living with partner who also has a disability Mentioned they are on a low income.
Emma	hearing impairment	Lives alone has a lot of home energy efficiency adaptations as owns home

Table 3: Focus Group 3

Group 3	Number	Details
Henry	Arthritis, mobility issues.	Did not discuss his home living situation but mentioned he has lived in his property a long time
Ella	MS	Lives with partner who also has a disability, moves between two countries
Natalie	Chronic pain condition,	Lives with husband and children, owns home
Annie	cerebral palsy, hearing impairment	Did not specify her home living situation

Table 4: Interview

Interview	Number	Details
Zoe	Mobility issues, hearing aids, wheelchair user	Lives alone in social housing, in Scotland



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