



Carbon Conversations: research brief

TEU are welcoming research into The Carbon Conversations as a vehicle for individual low-carbon lifestyle change. We would encourage any interested parties to participate in the course prior to undertaking research.

For more information please contact carbonconversations@teu.org.uk and we can put you in touch with Rosemary Randall.

Overview

Carbon Conversation groups provide a safe space that helps people connect, explore and then act on climate change. The courses consist of five two-hour sessions held fortnightly and a sixth 'reunion' session a month or so later. Based on a psychological understanding of barriers to change, the groups address the key areas of an individual carbon footprint in a supportive and non-judgemental fashion. The six meetings provide time for discussion, understanding, acceptance, laughter and practical plans.

The psychology of climate change

Carbon Conversations emerged from a recognition that for people to take meaningful, lasting and relatively fast action on climate change there is a need for a better public understanding of the complexity of our reactions to climate change: not just why some are willing to act and why others ignore or deny the problem but the strange mix of reactions that most of us have and the difficulty of getting behaviour to line up with intentions.

People who enrol in the Carbon Conversation groups usually do so because they want to take action on climate change and can see the gains that action will bring. The course recognises however that to turn a willingness into action individuals face significant decisions and changes that bring about anxiety, sadness, doubt, anger and a thousand other difficult emotions. Carbon Conversations are designed to touch upon and nurture understanding of these issues:

- inner conflict; anxiety;
- guilt;
- loss and grief;
- identity and aspiration;
- defence and resistance.

Having been featured in The Guardian's 'Manchester Report' as one of the 20 most promising ways to combat climate change, Carbon Conversation groups are becoming of increasing interest to a variety of researchers.

Some possible themes of enquiry are listed below:

1. Thematic

- Behaviour change and barriers to change.
- Loss, grief, identity.
- Motivations for change.
- Impact of information and/or values on action.
- Value of peer pressure & social connection.

2. Evaluative

- Creating baseline data.
- Evaluating quantitative change.
- Experience and *kinds* of change achieved.
- Needs of the facilitator.
- Process of making plans/ creating long term action-plans.
- Continuing efficacy – follow up long-term/ how much ongoing support & information necessary for continuing efficacy.
- Pre-enrolment perceptions (marketing).

Historical Development

Carbon Conversations courses have been developed by Rosemary Randall – a psychoanalytically trained psychotherapist and author of '[A New Climate for Psychotherapy?](#)' Rosemary is the founder and director of the Cambridge based charity responsible for the development of the course – Cambridge Carbon Footprint (CCF). In its wider work CCF uses approaches drawn from psychotherapy, social marketing and community work to engage diverse audiences in work on climate change. Since coverage of the courses in the Guardian, the groups have since spread more widely though the UK. Over 400 people have attended the courses run in Cambridge. Informal findings to date show that most people reduce their footprint by 1 tonne in the timeframe of the course and make plans to halve their footprint over the next 4-5 years.

Organisation

- Carbon Conversation groups are facilitated by 2 trained facilitators. 'Graduates' of the course can attend trainings to facilitate further courses in their area. The groups thus tend to 'cascade' in an area and become led by numerous community groups and organisations.
- The course consists of five two-hours sessions – run fortnightly - focusing on a different key emissions areas in individual lifestyles:
 1. Introductory session
 2. Home energy
 3. Travel
 4. Food
 5. Other consumables: goods and servicesThere is then a sixth 'reunion' session 4-8 weeks later. This provides space for year action planning and group discussion of barriers and needs.
- Each group member receives a 128 page course handbook, which forms the backbone of the 5 main sessions. The handbook consists of: short talks for facilitators; paired discussions, group discussions; home-activities to be completed between sessions; monitoring tools and action-planning tools.
- Each group runs through 3 specially designed board games on the themes of home energy, travel and food. These games are an interactive opportunity to work through possible lifestyle changes and barriers to change. The group is also provided with energy monitors, relevant literature, films and local information leaflets.
- Facilitators across the UK are supported by an online forum where reflections,

ideas, difficulties and technical advice can be shared. This space backs-up the support provided by Cambridge Carbon Footprint in Cambridge and TEU here in at the University.

Aims, ethos, and objectives

The aim of the groups is to provide a friendly, supportive milieu in which participants can:

- discuss climate change, their feelings and responses to it;
- find reliable, well-researched information;
- make significant reductions in their personal carbon emissions;
- move towards action at whatever level they wish – personally, in their families and communities, at work, or politically.

By the end of the group, participants should be able to:

- explain the basic facts about climate change;
- understand the relationship between their personal lifestyle and global CO₂ emissions;
- create a plan for halving their personal CO₂ emissions over a 4-5 year period.

More important than these formal objectives however is the creation of a group that feels confident, informed and comfortable about acting on climate change in whatever way feels appropriate to them.

Carbon Conversations at the University of Edinburgh

Currently a programme of Carbon Conversation groups are being run by Transition Edinburgh University (TEU). This makes up part of their Climate Challenge Fund project – a Scottish government fund for community groups responding to climate change. The project is facilitating University community members - both staff and students – to collectively cut their contribution to the global challenges of climate change and peak oil. The Carbon Conversations are a central activity of the project and will be rolled out as an opportunity for people to learn more about climate issues but also crucially to begin to take action with the support of a small group. We believe the courses will crucially support a number of other project areas due to the psychological approach to change – addressing the root causes of lifestyle choices.

TEU are funded to drive the cascading of the course until March 2011. TEU are helping to secure the continuation of the course in the University community after their funded period by facilitating the foundation of a professional network to support new facilitators. To secure the future of Carbon Conversations in Scotland TEU will be outreaching for people with experience both in the group process and more technical sides of low-carbon living to contribute small amounts of time to a voluntary support network.

Related research

American Psychological Association, 2009. 'Psychology and Global Climate Change: Addressing a Multi-faceted Phenomenon and Set of Challenges'.

<http://www.apa.org/science/about/publications/climate-change.aspx>

Crompton, T. & Kasser, T., 2009. *Meeting Environmental Challenges: The Role of Identity*. WWF-UK: Surrey.

http://assets.wwf.org.uk/downloads/meeting_environmental_challenges_the_role_of_human_identity.pdf

Rosemary Randall, 2005. 'A New Climate for Psychotherapy?', *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 3:3.

http://www.cambridgecarbonfootprint.org/docs/new_climate_psychotherapy.pdf