



A review of Defra's approach to building an evidence base for influencing sustainable behaviour



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ABSTRACT

Defra's approach to influencing people to live sustainably has evolved considerably since 2005 when the Sustainable Consumption Roundtable called for greater efforts by Government to better understand people, and how to influence changes in the way they behave. In response, Defra has developed a substantial evidence base devoted to improving understanding of the drivers for sustainable behaviours and how these can be applied to develop more effective environmental policies and programmes.

A core focus of Defra's research programme has been to identify and build on existing research and evidence which has the potential to inform new and innovative policy approaches. In some cases, this has involved work which looks at particular behavioural drivers, such as habits and norms, considering how these insights can inform and improve outcomes from policies that aim to influence citizen's behaviours. Other work has focused on operationalising this knowledge through trials and demonstration projects with an aim of understanding the practical implications of applying them, and measuring the benefits they can provide.

This paper reviews the key strands of Defra's behavioural research programme and some of the tools the department has used to apply this research. It considers Defra's work in building an evidence base that can be embedded into policy making and concludes with some insights drawn from this evidence. These address both why people are likely to act and why they might not, and best practice principles for delivering change.

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1. Introduction

It has been recognised for some time that influencing people to adopt more sustainable patterns of consumption is a key step in addressing some of the biggest environmental challenges the UK currently faces. For UK citizens, 75% of carbon emissions are derived from the products and services we buy and use. Whilst many people are actively making sustainable choices in their behaviour, this change is not yet at the level needed to meet environmental challenges (Defra, 2011a)¹. Although evidence shows that people are now less likely to see "green" as a minority lifestyle, with half (51%) of respondents in the UK in 2009 disagreeing with the

idea that "being green is not for the majority", compared to less than one third (30%) in 2007 (Public Attitudes Survey, Defra, 2007, 2009), this awareness – or knowledge – does not fully translate into action. Whilst reported levels of action have increased for a number of behaviours, and some people are willing to do more, there is considerable scope to increase action in many areas (Defra, 2011a).

The past 40 years or so has seen a rapidly growing body of academic and practitioner research concerned with understanding people's attitudes and behaviour towards the environment. The earlier focus on encouraging people to recycle more and waste less was concerned with understanding why individuals did or did not recycle, what barriers to participating they faced, and what the determinants to their behaviour were (for example see Schultz et al., 1995; Vining and Ebreo, 1990). With growing concern about climate change, the academic landscape moved onto research on a wider range of pro-environmental behaviours and sustainable consumption and lifestyles. Much of this literature is reviewed in Jackson (2004), Darnton (2008), Stern (2000), Collins et al. (2003) and Shove (2010) and includes a range of different approaches including social psychological, sociological and economic perspectives on behaviour.

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¹ Defra is the UK government department with responsible for policy and regulations on the environment, food and rural affairs. Areas of work include climate change, waste, water, the natural environment, biodiversity, and green business. See <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/>.

This paper focuses on Defra's approach to policies and programmes that specifically seek to influence the sustainable behaviour of citizens – as consumers, as households and as members of society. Whilst there had been no shortage of academic studies on influencing behaviour, the Government had not collated this evidence in a way that could support the question “what can Government do to influence people to live in a more sustainable way?” To address this, Defra initiated a programme of research to build an evidence base to enable this knowledge to be embedded in their policy making. This programme aimed to gather and synthesise much of the available evidence on ‘public understanding’ of peoples’ attitudes and behaviours, and explore a number of environmental issues in-depth.

In this paper, a selection of the research undertaken and the growing evidence base is reviewed with the aim of providing an overview of the key findings that have emerged so far from Defra's programme. First, however, a brief historical overview of the approach taken to building the evidence base is given followed by a brief discussion of the approach to embedding evidence into Defra's policy process. This highlights some of the guiding principles that have directed this work including a strong emphasis on evidence led policy making, and the importance of collaborative working to apply the outputs from the programme.

The paper then considers the principal strands of Defra's research programme which seek to understand behavioural theory through exploring and collating academic literature and practitioner experience; and building on the emerging evidence through further research and commissioning of pilot projects. In synthesising this evidence, Defra highlights four key aspects of what influences people to adopt sustainable behaviours or why they might not (Defra, 2011a).

To interpret and apply the evidence to policy, Defra has developed and adopted a number of tools for working with policy makers on this issue. This paper briefly discusses how these can be used to inform the development of targeted interventions. This paper then concludes by presenting a number of key principles that Defra identifies as particularly important for influencing change.

2. Background to Defra's approach to influencing sustainable behaviours

2.1. Historical overview

Defra's approach to influencing people to live more sustainably has evolved since 2005. The publication of the UK Sustainable Development Strategy *Securing the Future* (Defra, 2005) included a chapter called “Helping People Make Better Choices” which was presented as an alternative to the usual ‘command and control’ measures used by government to influence individual behaviour, and saw the appearance of the 4 Es model for framing behavioural interventions. Following this Defra commissioned the Sustainable Consumption Roundtable (SCR) to advise on how best to influence people to live more sustainably. The SCR was jointly hosted by the then National Consumer Council (NCC)² and the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC)³ from September 2004 to March 2006. It assembled a small group of experts in consumer policy, retailing and sustainability to advise Government on how to achieve their sustainability aims. The SCR extensively reviewed the existing research and evidence base supplementing this with a range of its own primary research to explore particular options and approaches to achieving more sustainable consumption patterns. This work

culminated in the publication of the SCR's report ‘I Will If You Will’ in 2006 (SCR, 2006). This report contained a number of key recommendations which formed the basis for much of Defra's initial work in this area.

By the end of 2006, Defra had scoped its Environmental Behaviours Strategy (Defra, 2006), and formed the ‘Sustainable Behaviours Unit’—a single knowledge-based hub designed to draw together research on and evaluation of pro-environmental behaviour programmes⁴. The aim was to move to a more structured, evidence-based approach of public engagement and influencing behaviour. This strategy identified the scale of the challenge, produced a ‘long list’ of pro-environmental behaviours together with a number of possible policy interventions, and proposed conceptual ideas for developing a segmentation of the population (Defra, 2006). To gather and synthesise available evidence, Defra commissioned a number of evidence reviews. In 2008, Defra published ‘A Framework for Pro-Environmental Behaviours’ (Defra, 2008). This work pulled together the early evidence on public understanding, attitudes and behaviours towards the environment. In consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, the behaviour goals were set, and a segmentation model for UK society, focussing on peoples’ attitudes and willingness to act in a sustainable way, was produced.

Defra continued to build the evidence base, commissioning further work on ‘public understanding’, focusing further research on understanding how to encourage sustainable behaviours, and identifying key insights on peoples’ motivations for and barriers to sustainable behaviour. During 2008 and 2009, Defra commissioned two key strands of research:

1. Understanding how specific theoretical concepts could apply to sustainable behaviours, and
2. Testing the evidence through pilot projects.

In 2010, the Sustainable Behaviours Unit became known as the ‘Centre of Expertise on Influence Behaviour’. The Centre built on the work of the earlier Unit; and continued to focus on building a coherent evidence base, supporting both large and small-scale projects, and providing advice, support and tools on best practice for influencing behaviour. Its core purpose was to enable citizen-focused policy and communications that are targeted, engaging, relevant, and delivered more effectively.

In 2011, following extensive research and consultation, with over 100 representatives from business, civil society, other government departments, local authorities and Government policy teams, the Centre updated the 2008 Framework and published ‘The Sustainable Lifestyles Framework’ (Defra, 2011a). This new edition summarised the key insights from the previous two years’ of work, outlined a new set of key behaviours that were taken to constitute sustainable lifestyles, offered key insights on why some people act and why others might not, and presented a range of ‘best practice’ approaches to influence sustainable behaviour. The Framework provides a useful tool in helping to shape approaches to influencing behaviour across a range of policy areas. It also provided a useful ‘definition’ of what Defra considered to be a ‘sustainable lifestyle’ or at least some of the behaviours that this might comprise.

The publication of this Framework illustrates a shift from ‘pro-environmental behaviour’ to behaviours that constitute a ‘sustainable lifestyle’ (or sustainable living). This is an important distinction reflecting evidence which shows that not all sustainable behaviours are motivated by environmental concerns—for example,

² The National Consumer Council is now part of Consumer Focus. See <http://www.consumerfocus.org.uk/>.

³ For further details see <http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/>.

⁴ The terms ‘pro-environmental behaviour’ and ‘sustainable behaviour’ are used interchangeably in this report, although the latter is now being used more frequently.

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