



Community engagement for greener energy strategies across health and education anchor institutions

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Introduction

Operating theatres are the most energy-intensive parts of the hospital, requiring a constant supply for heating, ventilation and air conditioning.¹ Decarbonising them requires behavioural changes by frontline clinical and management teams, but also a change in the way clean energy is supplied. As hospitals are anchor institutions for communities, they can lead the way in change, especially in combination with adjacent, major education sites.² While it is clear how solar energy would benefit the community at large, further insight is needed on public perspectives, including how much should the community be involved in the development of energy strategies and how to best communicate these. To gain an understanding of the community's views towards these themes, a public engagement event was organised on 14th March 2024, by researchers at the University of Birmingham at the Exchange in Central Birmingham, West Midlands, UK. The event was aimed at representatives of anchor institutions in the West Midlands, who had an interest or previous experience in working to achieve clean energy within their institutions, and patients, the public, and members of the local communities.

Results

The meeting was attended by 41 people including researchers, healthcare professionals, member of the local government and members of the public. The first session included a panel discussion revolving around the benefits of implementing solar energy in educational and health institutions in the West Midlands and barriers

encountered by those who have been successful in its introduction in the past. Emphasis was put on the crucial need for shared learning and collaboration, as sharing different experiences can facilitate the introduction of solar energy within other institutions, upscaling the production of clean, reliable energy and enhancing the benefits for the community. The second session was an interactive voting activity and discussion, acting as a public consultation (Figure 1) which yielded the following responses:

- 97% (40/41) of attendees felt that community input was needed in the development of energy schemes for hospitals with over half (51%) (21/41) recommending high-level co-design and the rest (46%, 19/41) low-level consultation in order to achieve this.
- 100% of attendees believed that health and education sites should work together to develop a sustainable energy scheme such as solar farms. Almost half (48%, 20/41) of these responses wanted to include other sectors in the collaboration.
- 90% (37/41) of respondents agreed that sites in the community both large and small should be involved in sustainable energy projects.

The discussion highlighted that the public strongly supports the implementation of solar energy. Provision of solar energy from panels installed in hospitals and schools could limit fuel poverty in the community while having health benefits for the local population. The public also believed that solar panels should be installed in new buildings including schools, hospitals, and



council housing, and that this could be a cost-effective intervention for both the local and national government.

Discussion

Anchor institutions are large organisations that are unlikely to relocate and have a significant stake in their local area.² They have sizeable assets that can be used to support their local community's health and well-being. It, therefore, makes sense that as anchor institutions, NHS Trusts can lead in linking other important community facilities to be an exemplar of sustainability. For collaborations between institutions and the public, co-partnership was seen as essential, but the discussion highlighted the necessity for strategic consultation of the public through regional representatives of the institutions, as this would be beneficial in preventing public fatigue. Following this discussion, representatives from the institutions present were invited to form a strategic partnership to implement and upscale solar energy within the West Midlands.

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Figure 1: Community engagement discussion and voting on greener energy strategies (Birmingham, UK, March 14th, 2024)

