

## Using Public Conversations to expose hidden hopes and fears about making home heating more sustainable

This story of change focuses on the ‘Public Conversations’ held near the end of the JUSTHEAT project. JUSTHEAT aims to encourage reflection on past home heating practices, via oral histories, to inform today’s shift away from fossil fuel heating (the transition). The goal is to ensure that the transition is socially and culturally sensitive, addressing the needs and desires of households, which is essential to gaining public consent for the transition.

To that end, JUSTHEAT trialled Public Conversations—small, structured discussions between citizens and decision-makers about the past and future of home heating. These events encouraged honest dialogue about hopes, concerns, and expectations for the transition. A key focus was involving voices less often heard in debates about our energy futures.

Public Conversations were held in Sweden, Finland, Romania, and the UK between 2024–2025. The last and largest event took place in Rotherham, UK, a former coal-mining area particularly vulnerable to being overlooked in the transition. Due to its history, Rotherham was slower to shift from coal to gas, and communities there may be wary of further change.

These conversations were designed as roundtable events using prompts to guide participants from reflecting on past heating experiences, to their current arrangements, and finally to their thoughts about the future. In Rotherham, the conversation involved ten participants and six decision-makers, including local councillors and officers from both local and regional authorities. The session was facilitated by a citizen engagement specialist and held in a local museum and art gallery.



Photo by: Aimee Ambrose, JUSTHEAT Project Leader

Participants were welcomed with refreshments in a room featuring a traditional Yorkshire Range (a traditional way to heat locally), linking to the area's heating heritage. They listened to local oral histories and watched short films prepared by JUST-HEAT lead artist Becky Shaw, which playfully juxtaposed different eras of home heating. These creative elements helped orientate thinking towards home heating and how it has changed over time.

In the conversation itself, attendees were encouraged to discuss what brought them 'thermal delight' (joy from warming the body). The discussion naturally progressed to current concerns and hopes and fears for the future, particularly around technologies like heat pumps and home insulation. The event ended with decision-makers reflecting on what they had learned from the participants.

The session revealed that while participants recognized the need to move away from fossil fuels, they had concerns – mainly around cost, installation, and the practical and sensory experience of using heat pumps. Many of these concerns may be overstated, pointing to the need for clearer information and reassurance. The event provided a valuable opportunity for social learning – where participants and stakeholders shared knowledge

in a relaxed setting, helping to dispel misunderstandings about heat pumps.

Decision-makers appreciated hearing directly from lesser heard communities. They came away understanding that while people are reluctant to make a 'clean sweep', moving rapidly from fossil fuelled heating to heat pumps, they are open to adding low-carbon heating options into the mix of ways to heat the home. They also learned that gradual approaches to the transition are more likely to be accepted (i.e starting with solar panels then later considering heat pumps).

*Overall, the Rotherham Public Conversation demonstrated the value of inclusive dialogue in shaping faster, more popular transition that has community consent.*

