

# Changing behaviour through policy making

## 1. Introduction

Achieving sustainable development will depend largely on long-term changes in behaviours of individuals, communities, firms and the public sector.

Government can play a pivotal role in changing these behaviours over time. But it has to find a way of engaging with both individuals and the public, in supporting the development of new social norms and fostering facilitating conditions in a strategic and long-term approach to behaviour change.

This paper provides a detailed discussion of the changing behaviour model which is introduced the sustainable development strategy “*Securing the future*”<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Behaviour

Research<sup>2</sup> that was commissioned by Defra shows the scale of the challenge we face in helping people to make better choices that deliver moving towards sustainable development and a “one planet economy”.

*“Information does not necessarily lead to increased awareness, and increased awareness does not necessarily lead to action. Information provision, whether through advertisements, leaflets or labelling, must be backed up by other approaches.”*

**Demos & Green Alliance, 2003**

How we behave is determined by many factors. Individual behaviours are deeply embedded in social situations, institutional contexts and cultural norms. Consumers often find themselves ‘locked in’ to unsustainable behaviours by a combination of habit, disincentives, social norms and cultural expectations.

*Motivating Sustainable Consumption*<sup>3</sup> - written for policy makers - reviews the literature on consumer behaviour and behavioural change. It discusses the evidence base for different models of change. It also highlights the dilemmas and opportunities that policy-makers face in addressing unsustainable consumption patterns and encouraging more sustainable lifestyles.

<sup>1</sup> Available via <http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/index.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Motivating Sustainable Consumption - a review of evidence on consumer behaviour and behavioural change. <http://www.sd-research.org.uk/documents/MotivatingSCfinal.pdf>, Tim Jackson, 2005

▪ *The impact of sustainable development on public behaviour* Andrew Darnton, for Defra, March 2004 (<http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/taking-it-on/pdf/desk-research1.pdf>)

▪ *Driving public behaviours for sustainable lifestyles*, Andrew Darnton, for Defra, May 2004 (<http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/taking-it-on/pdf/desk-research2.pdf>)

▪ *Personal Responsibility and Changing Behaviour: the state of knowledge and its implications for public policy*, Prime Minister Strategy Unit, February 2004 (<http://www.number10.gov.uk/files/pdf/pr.pdf>)

▪ *Carrots, sticks and sermons: influencing public behaviour for environmental goals* Demos and the Green Alliance, for Defra, December 2004. (<http://www.green-alliance.org.uk/publications/PubCarrotsSticksSermons/>)

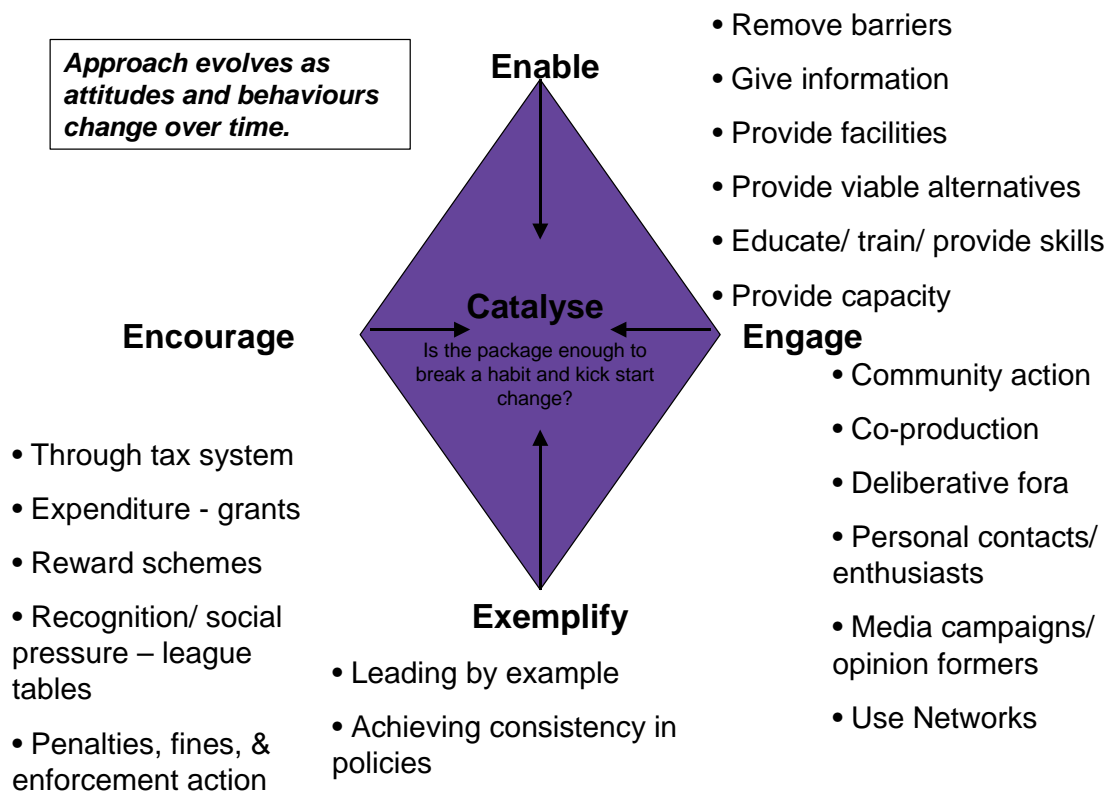
<sup>3</sup> <http://www.sd-research.org.uk/SDRNbriefing1MotivatingSustainableConsumption.pdf.pdf>

In the past, we have seen significant benefits to society brought about by change in behaviour following regulation and economic incentives (taxes and grants). But those have been more effective with business than with individuals where we have tended to rely on big publicity campaigns to give information – but that has rarely led to lasting changes in action. One of the key messages from our consultation was that too often governments say one thing and do another themselves – which at best means we are less effective in achieving our goals and at worst creates cynicism and makes people reject the message.

### 3. A new approach

We think we will only succeed in making the changes we need if we adopt a new, comprehensive approach. We need to make sure that all the factors which are necessary to change behaviour are present – and then we need to ask ourselves whether this is likely to be enough – and if not what more we need to do to bring about a change. The aim is to establish new and more sustainable ways of living, working and producing – and for these to become the new habits.

#### The new approach – a diagrammatic representation



#### i: Enable – making it easier

This is the starting point. There is no point asking people to change if they don't know how – or if they know what do, but what they need to do it is not available. We need to help people make responsible choices by providing them with the education, skills and information, and by making those choices easy with easily accessible alternatives and suitable infrastructure.

In some cases enabling may be all that is needed – where for example higher standards are built into the products we buy. In some cases we can change actions without first changing attitudes. For instance, access to kerbside schemes leads to an increase in recycling behaviour but not necessarily in attitudes to recycling. When asked in surveys what would make people recycle more, the majority put kerbside recycling as the top answer<sup>4</sup>.

## ii Encourage – give the right signals

Government will look at the most effective techniques to encourage and, where necessary, enforce, behaviour change. These might include taxes or other ways of giving price signals, peer pressure, league tables, funding, or regulation. We should also consider scope for positive incentives to reward good behaviour rather than penalties.

Chapter 2 of the Strategy<sup>5</sup> sets out the key principles that Government will apply when determining whether there is a role for economic instruments to tackle particular environmental issues.

## iii. Engage – get people involved

Sustainable development cannot be delivered from the top. Government can provide a health care system, but it cannot deliver 'health' without people taking personal responsibility for their diet, exercise, family planning, smoking, and or substance abuse. That will only succeed if people take responsibility for what they do. This can work best if people affected are involved early on – developing policies jointly – an approach known as co-production<sup>6</sup>.

We also need to recognise that remote messages from government are often not the best way to get people to act and take responsibility. Face-to-face contact often works better.

### ***Involving the public***

Deliberative Forums are a good example of this. They allow more in-depth discussion about options than an opinion poll or a focus group – and allows discussion between people who have strong and conflicting views or are experts in their field. This approach has been tried in other countries. In Texas it led to a change in energy policy; DCMS used this approach for the BBC charter renewal and the DTI had citizens juries on flexible working.

## **Communication and the importance of involvement**

*Campaigns for sustainable behaviour change should employ a wide arrange of tools, including policy instruments, infrastructure provision, and information provision; a targeted approach observing difference between subgroups should be adopted.”*

**Andrew Darnton (Research and Analysis), research commissioned by Defra, 2004**

<sup>4</sup> Survey of Public Attitudes to Quality of Life and to the Environment 2001, Defra and ONS, September 2002

<sup>5</sup> Available via <http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/index.htm>

<sup>6</sup> *Personal Responsibility and Changing Behaviour: the state of knowledge and its implications for public policy*, Prime Minister Strategy Unit, February 2004 (<http://www.number10.gov.uk/files/pdf/pr.pdf>)

Research<sup>7</sup> shows that information alone rarely changes people's behaviour and that short-term communication campaigns alone are insufficient. Targeted communications should be part of a larger process of involving the public, co-ordinated with other interventions such as regulation, and having the right goods, services, and infrastructure.

The Government recognises the need to consult with and to engage people over longer periods to identify things they care passionately about and real-life examples that people can relate to.

Examples of this type of approach include the work Government is doing on climate change communications. An evidence based communications strategy<sup>8</sup> has been developed and we intend to publish a Toolkit to help local communicators. This approach to communications and the toolkit will be applicable to other policy areas. The toolkit will shortly be available on the website.

#### **iv. Exemplify – Government takes the lead**

The Government aims to lead by example and wants to manage its estates and purchase goods and services sustainably. It is also planning to train civil servants to make decisions that promote sustainable development. The new National School of Government is looking to embed sustainable development in course curriculum.

Government can bring about huge changes in the wider society both in its own operations and through consistent policymaking.

*“Sustainable development will not just be a subject in the classroom: it will be in its bricks and mortar and the way the school uses and even generates its own power. Our students won't just be told about sustainable development, they will see and work within it: a living, learning, place in which to explore what a sustainable lifestyle means.”*

**Prime Minister, September 2004**

#### **v. Catalyse – breaking habits**

What will really make things change? Unsustainable behaviour may be deeply entrenched and require powerful catalysts to change habits and ease the way to new policies. That means we need to look at how the policies come together as a package, and how we use them to trigger change. Our aim is to promote lasting change that forms the new habits and opens the way to further shifts, as for example has happened with smoking.

Since smoking was first linked to early death in the mid-1950s, smoking rates among men have declined from over 70% to 28% in 2003-04. As smoking has become a minority habit, new options have opened up for policy makers – making travel smoke-free, voluntary workplace restrictions etc. Yet even this

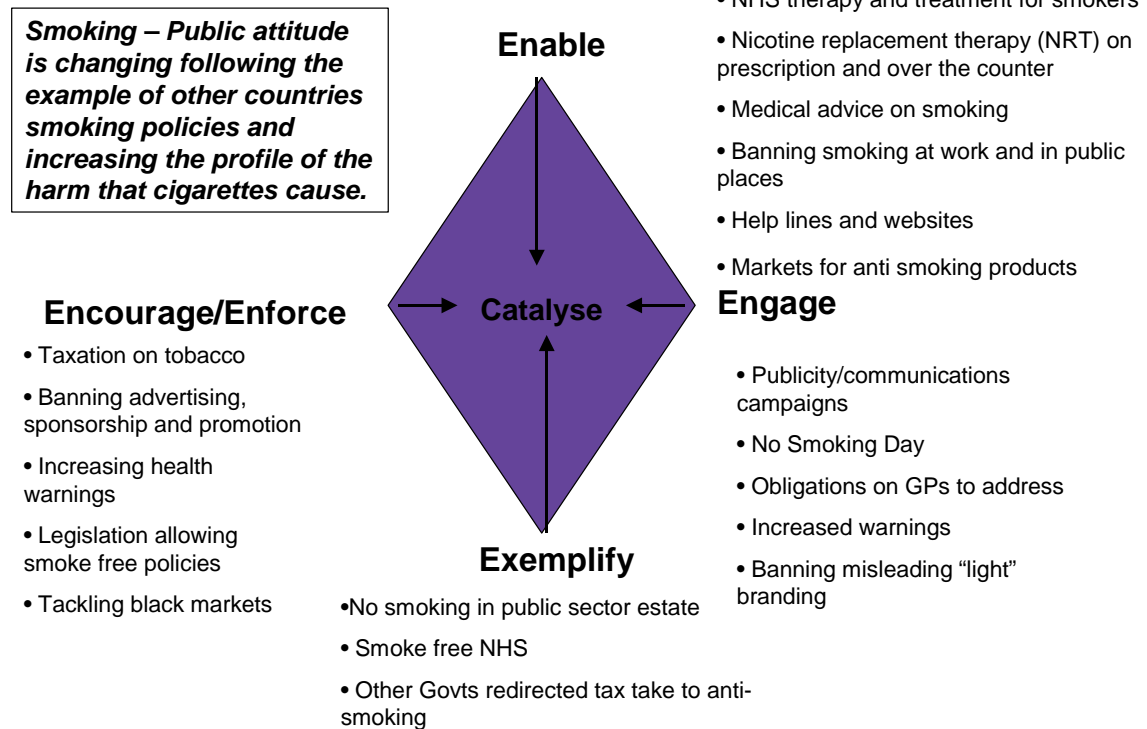
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<sup>7</sup> See references under footnote 2

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/climatechange/02.htm#ccc>

example shows how long a process this can be - more than one in four of the adult population still smoke despite compelling evidence that it will be the cause of premature death for half of them.

Behaviour change is a process that may unfold over months, years or, in the case of the most radical behaviour shifts, decades. The sort of legislation to ban smoking at almost all workplaces and public places that is proposed in the Choosing Health White Paper was not viewed as politically acceptable even two years ago.



#### 4. What's next

In order to evaluate and share what works best in practice we are establishing a “behaviour change” forum across Government departments and other stakeholders. This will enable behaviour change to be better understood among policy makers; help behaviour-based policies to be more successful through greater policy coherence and evaluation; and promote understanding of behaviour change as a core policy skill.

#### 5. Contacts

For more information contact the Sustainable Development Unit in Defra:

- [sdudiv@defra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:sdudiv@defra.gsi.gov.uk)
- 020 7238 5793