

Summary

A home without gas?

Homeowners and their views on sustainable alternatives

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Original title:
Onder de pannen zonder gas?
978 90 377 0920 9

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As part of its climate policy, the Dutch government has decided to make the built environment in the Netherlands free from natural gas. The purpose of this study was to explore how the Dutch public feels about this transition to gas-free homes and neighbourhoods. We designed an in-depth study into the knowledge, attitudes and experiences of homeowners in relation to the transition to living without natural gas. To do this, we organised four focus groups with a total of 32 participants representing a wide spectrum of homeowners (in terms of age, gender and education level). We asked the focus group members for their views on the government decision to make the built environment natural gas-free, what they have heard about the transition to gas-free living to date and how they have experienced the transition thus far. We also asked what expectations people have of a gas-free future and what role they see for themselves in this transition. Based on the discussions we draw a number of conclusions.

Limited support for the transition to gas-free living

The support for phasing out natural gas appears to be limited: people feel largely resigned to the government's decision, but show little willingness to start acting on it themselves because of their expectations of future technologies, uncertainty about policy and concerns about the affordability and effectiveness of measures. The vast majority of participants are inclined to adopt a wait-and-see attitude, partly because of the many uncertainties. It is therefore also uncertain whether the active engagement that is expected from homeowners in the energy transition will actually be achieved. Given the important role of home owners in upscaling sustainable home technologies, this lack of active engagement could seriously hamper the achievement of sustainability outcomes in the built environment.

People understand the importance of the underlying objectives behind the policy of moving towards gas-free living, but do not always agree with the measures chosen to achieve it. The legitimacy of the proposed policy is under fire, as illustrated by critical attitudes and question marks regarding the process and content of this decision, and the distribution of costs and benefits of measures. Furthermore respondents doubt whether plans will actually be implemented and that the government will deliver on its promises and undertakings. They also have critical questions concerning their homes and neighbourhoods; what benefits will the transition actually bring for homeowners themselves? Do the benefits really outweigh the costs? Will costs and benefits be equally divided? Uncertainties such as these mean that most respondents show little enthusiasm to jump into action; they expect help from the government or other actors. There is a small minority who, often regardless of policy, do want to take initiative in making their homes or neighbourhoods more sustainable, but who fail to do so because proper guidelines are lacking and incentive structures are currently inadequate.

Level of knowledge varies, but need for clarity and transparency is felt widely

The study brought forward a mixed picture regarding the knowledge and experience of homeowners: some are well aware of the proposed policies and alternative technologies, while others as yet know nothing about these. In the focus groups, this difference in knowledge led to an interesting exchange of experiences with heating homes without gas. Knowledge shared between respondents appeared to be trusted more than knowledge brought in by an external source. Despite differences in knowledge, however, there was a widely felt need for transparency and clarity about policy (costs, timeframe) and alternatives. Transparency about the process, even if the picture is not yet complete, is regarded by most focus group participants as extremely important.

People feel (too) little involved in the transition

Many homeowners feel that gas-free living is being imposed on the public. The sense of not being involved is accompanied by a degree of resignation; people see the transition to gas-free living as a given. These feelings are not surprising at this stage in the process, in which plans to disconnect homes from the natural gas network have not yet crystallised. However, they do pose an obstacle on the path to actual participation. As long as homeowners have no information about (preparation of) specific plans for their neighbourhood, they also have no way of showing their wish to be involved. Homeowners feel a need to be able to express their concerns and questions about the transition at an early stage.

Affordability is a concern, but is closely interwoven with other concerns

Concerns about the affordability of alternatives to natural gas appear to be mainly related to worries about the effectiveness of alternative heat sources, about loss of control and about uncertainty regarding future developments. People are also afraid of a growing inequalities emerging in society and argue that the costs of the transition must be fairly distributed. There is no consensus on what such a fair distribution should look like, but there is broad support for a form of property-based funding (which spreads out costs over a longer period because the loan is linked to the home rather than to the person), provided loans are granted on favourable terms and do not lead to a net increase in housing costs.

Both autonomy and collectivity are important for homeowners

Considering the degree to which people are willing to take action themselves, on the one hand we find the usual division into early adopters, followers and laggards, and on the other between more individualistic and more collectivist individuals. These oppositions hide differences in the importance that people attach to autonomy versus collectivity. Most respondents says they want to retain control over their own situation; at the same time, many see benefits in a collective approach in which knowledge, expertise and costs can be shared. People also see an important role for the government in ensuring that the adaptation of the heating system as a utility is properly organised.