

Grand Challenge

Learnings from clusters to dispersed sites

Chair



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Learnings from clusters to dispersed sites.

The six Cluster Roadmap projects funded by the Industrial Decarbonisation Challenge concluded in March 2023. Going forward, how can we use the learning from these clusters to accelerate industrial decarbonisation in other UK clusters and also dispersed sites? The Black Country differed from the other industrial cluster roadmap projects since the cluster is characterised by the presence of large number of manufacturing industries and does not have the large emitters found in the coastal clusters.

Chair: Jonathan Radcliffe (IDRIC Academic Cluster Lead for Black Country, University of Birmingham).
Panellists: Ronnie Quinn (NECCUS), Paul Davies (7CO2), Zoë Colbeck (The Solent Cluster), Imogen Rattle (University of Leeds)

The session kicked off with background about the Black Country Cluster a “cluster of dispersed sites”. Here, the response has been to set up Zero Carbon Hubs and this has led to the creation of 6 Masterplans – each with an anchor firm and partners.

It was noted that there is a need to be flexible on what a “cluster” is. For example, Scotland is a country not a cluster. In some ways, the cluster being set up was to meet BEIS / Department of Energy Security and Net Zero requirements, although employing this cluster terminology is still a valuable way forward. It was noted that it is important to create a plan, but reality means plans need to adapt and are, at best, a snapshot which usually needs to be revisited further down the line.

A second point raised was that if we focus on just clusters and pipelines, it will leave rest of the UK behind. Rail and shipping are very important and must be supported by government; this also opens up international imports.

Moving onto knowledge gaps and sharing learnings, the panel reflected that there are many variables related to industrial decarbonisation, depending on sector, technology and place. Each of these leads to different gaps and information needs. Information sharing is not as wide as one would think, with no “roll out by osmosis” or public forum to share ideas.

The panel noted that the cluster approach can potentially put players in competition with each other, but that IDRIC is valuable because collaboration is fostered.

There was discussion about the tension between accelerating pace but at the same time developing projects that are going to last and provide value for money. Finally, it was agreed that there needs to be a focus on local area energy planning where efforts are concentrated on decarbonising the whole system.

In conclusion, industry will choose how they are going to decarbonise and that will drive the solution. Commercial reality along with the geography and proximity to pipelines, ports and existing manufacturing etc will “win”, rather than a top-down approach.