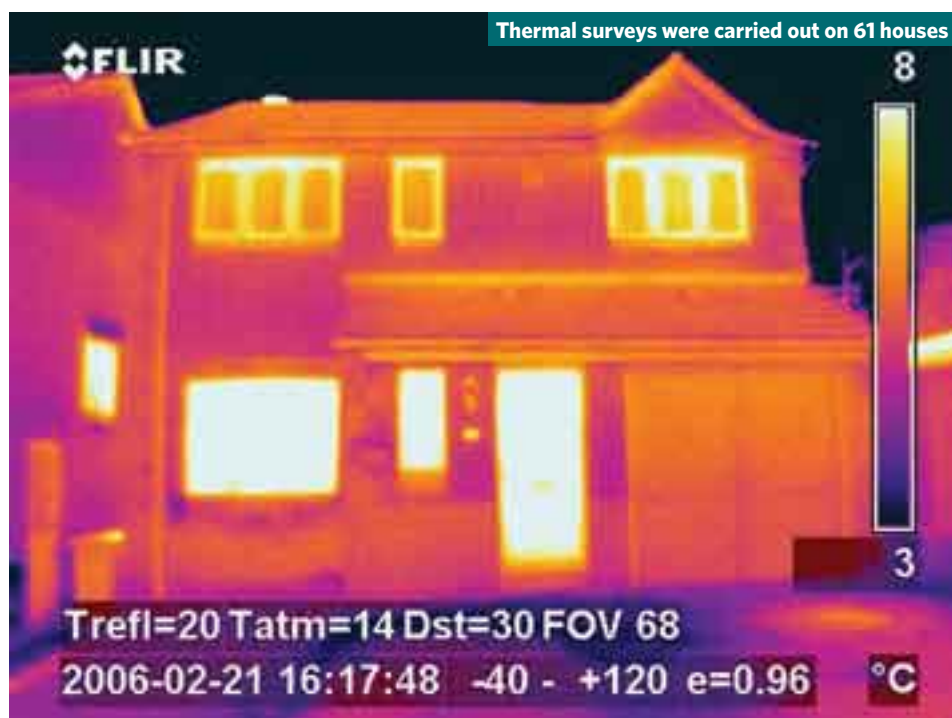


# The home front

*Simon Hodgson gets a sneaky preview of a major new report showing just how easy it is to cut the household footprint. Or not...*



Let me guess that you are interested in matters environmental; a pretty safe bet I think. So let me speculate further that you take this home with you, and have at least pondered what you might do to reduce your own footprint.

But I wonder if you've managed to cut it by any measurable amount? How about the 10 per cent cut to carbon proposed by this year's 10:10 campaign? What about the interim 34 per cent in the Climate Change Act? Or the whole-hog 80 per cent carbon cut that the Act finally targets?

Well, if you're like most of us (and pace – I know many of you are not) you don't really know: don't know where you are starting from, where you are trying to get to, or what might take you there. Most of us don't know – in any meaningful sense – how much electricity or gas we use at home, how much carbon this equates to, how many tonnes of rubbish we throw away each year, how much of this is – or could be – recycled, how much water we use ... you get the picture. The more engaged among us might have looked up some national benchmarks. Others may have used a

generic 'footprint calculator', but I'll bet that only a handful of us could say "we produced 5.45 tonnes of carbon last year, which was down 11 per cent on the year before that, thanks to new insulation and the warmer winter". And we're the environmental professionals.

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## **"The average householder has little or no idea what they are consuming"**

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So what about the general public? A study about to be released has tracked in detail the progress of 100 households over a year as they tried to cut their environmental impact. The 21st Century Living Project was a large-scale partnership between Cornwall's Eden Project, Homebase and Acona (so I confess an interest). It was created to look rigorously at what people could achieve, what worked, what didn't and what got in the way. We recruited 100 nationally representative households (balanced across

house type, age, and social group), being careful not to select the green-and-keen but a random representational spread. We had old and young, married and single, wealthy and not, the interested and the sceptical. Each household kicked-off the year with an audit, partly to let us measure their starting point, partly to nudge them into action. They got £500 to spend as they wished, a goody-bag containing everything from energy monitors to shower timers, an on-call project manager and – perhaps most importantly – the promise of a repeat audit at the end.

At intervals through the year we set up some 'interventions' – a thermal image survey done on 61 of the houses by a team from the University of Plymouth, a Grow your own competition to keep people interested through the summer, and an interactive website (the most popular thread: What shall I spend my £500 on?). And the RESOLVE team from the University of Surrey did more detailed research on the attitudes and values held by our households – who by now could be excused for feeling a bit like lab rats – both before and after the project.

Eden managed the 21st Century Living Project, interested in gleaning practical and inspirational advice that it can pass to its million visitors a year. The Charity aims to 'remind people what nature gives to us and to help people to learn how to look after it in return'. Homebase provided direct and indirect resource, wanting to understand how it could better help customers and – more fundamentally – if they actually wanted to be helped. And we at Acona were mesmerised by the growing gap between the carbon reduction numbers produced by policy 'winks' and the evidence of our own eyes, and wondering if and when anyone was going to comment on the state of the Emperor's trousers.

The year is now over: we finished the final audits in November 2009 and the release of the full report is imminent. And embargoed until that date. But as we're among friends here, I don't suppose there's any harm in

giving you a little taste of what we found; as long as you promise solemnly not to tell anyone else and to go and buy the book (or download it free from the 21stCenturyLiving, Homebase or Acona websites).

Well the results were certainly compelling. Some hunches were confirmed, while other long-held beliefs were shredded. People are (surprisingly?) willing to act – almost everyone did something and many of our households made really significant changes. We also found that they were happy to spend their own money on top

of the project grant. But – in a field awash with claim and counter claim – people are desperate for clear authoritative information. What can I do? What should I buy? Will it work? Will it make my house damp? And will it save anything anyway?

There's some fascinating stuff about who made the biggest changes – I'll leave you to guess whether it was the Guardian or Sun readers, the greenies or the meanies. When asked at the beginning of the project people expected 'techno-fixes' to their questions – most people planned to spend their grant not

change their behaviour. But by the end, this had changed noticeably and our hundred homes rang to cries of "turn it off" and "close the curtains". People in general found it easier than they thought to save energy.

Or at least they think they did. We know they must have saved energy – the results in the report show it clearly – and some waste and water too, but calculating just how much seems to be an impossible sum. The problem is that the average householder has little or no idea what they are consuming. They have an inkling that their monthly bill is, say, £100 (the UK national average according to DECC), and that it's gone up or down, but no idea about whether they are using more or less energy or water than this time last year. Even with dedicated experts, the project team could make little or no headway on this matter. So essentially the country is asking householders to make 34 per cent cuts in something they can't measure and can't relate to. "It's like making a journey from A to Bk," said one of the team, "without any idea whether you are starting from A, or where B is apart from a general sense that it's that-a-way."

Surely we can do better than this? I can access national statistics, the home addresses of half the globe or the seconds I spent on my mobile phone last month at the click of a mouse. But I can't tell if I used more gas this month than last. You'll have to wait another week or so for the Report's main findings, but I can tell you one for free. If we are to stand any chance of cutting domestic fuel use, information is most definitely power. ■

*Simon Hodgson is MD and senior partner at Acona, where he heads the Group's sustainable business practice  
simon.hodgson@acona.com*



The 21st century living website supported households through the project

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