

Net Zero Transition Reflections and learnings from a Participatory Action Research approach



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June 2023

Ofgem

Ofgem are the energy regulator for Great Britain. **We work to protect energy consumers, especially vulnerable people**, by ensuring they are treated fairly and benefit from a cleaner, greener environment.

The **Consumer Insight and Behavioural Science team** are experts on **consumers and human behaviour** and we use this knowledge to help **Ofgem make better decisions**.

We use a **range of research methods** to better understand **consumers' attitudes, perceptions, experiences and behaviours** within the energy market.

Toynbee Hall

Toynbee Hall are a **community organisation founded in 1884**. We work alongside **people facing poverty and injustice** to build a fairer and happier society.

Toynbee Hall are specialists on promoting inclusive design in policymaking.

Toynbee Hall work with peer researchers with lived experience of poverty and injustice to carry out **solutions-focused participatory action research projects**.

Participatory action research is a method by which communities and individuals with *lived* experiences shape and partake in the research, with end-to-end involvement across the research process.

Challenge: designing a fairer energy system as we transition to net zero

Partnership:
Ofgem, Fair by Design and Toynbee Hall

Recruitment:
13 peer researchers with lived experience of fuel poverty

Explore: peer researchers explore key issues around transition to net zero and potential impact on them

Collaborate:
Peer researchers meet Ofgem staff

Co-design research:
peer researchers decide on research focus and work with professional researchers to design question guide

Research phase:
peer researchers lead workshops with 38 participants, analyse findings and co-design solutions

Action phase: peer researchers share findings and proposals with stakeholders in energy sector

Key findings from the report

1. Awareness of how to transition to a net zero household is low.
2. The cost of 'green' choices can be too high.
3. Private and social tenants are not in a position to be able to make green household adaptations.
4. There are social and financial barriers to the adoption of smart technologies.
5. Energy companies need to better identify and support vulnerable consumers.



Net Zero Transition for Low-income Consumers:

A Participatory Action Research Project

A Toynbee Hall report in
partnership with Fair by
Design and Ofgem
August 2022



Attitudes towards technological innovation in the net zero energy transition

- Low-income households have low trust and significant privacy concerns regarding smart meters
- They are concerned about being excluded from the benefits of smart tariffs (because of how they use energy or being priced out of smart appliances)
- They worry smart meters, tariffs and a smart, flexible energy system will lead to lower bills for wealthier people and higher bills for them.
- They feel there needs to be support to help them benefit from smart meters and related technologies.

"You know, where is the data going? That's a concern. For me, it's like, what else is going to come out from it as well? What are they going to use it for?"

"If my usage spikes for few weeks or even dips my energy provider will know I have guests or (been) away...which is quite personal I believe."

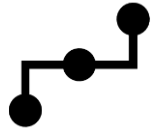
Reflections on the PAR process

Ofgem

- Ofgem's first experience of **participatory action research and resulted in** practicable and insightful findings and recommendations.
- Peer researchers and Ofgem were able to align on bigger picture (fair transition to Net Zero) whilst establishing an understanding about Ofgem's role, remit and upcoming priority areas of work.
- Directly interacting with community members encouraged us to reflect on current gap between policy makers and consumers.
- Our hopes for this work are for it to be championed for its inclusive, on-the-ground approach to deriving consumer insight and exploring relevance of recommendations/findings across policy teams in Ofgem.

Peer Researcher

- High expectations – The idea that Ofgem can do anything! We learned more about who is responsible for what in the energy sector. Sometimes we pushed back on what Ofgem said they can't do!
- As a group, our awareness was very low about what the net zero transition even was and how it could affect us. For peer researchers and participants we learned a lot about the transition and a lot about smart appliances in particular.
- Our inclusive approach is a real strength. Peer researchers could facilitate really accessible workshops, including with digitally excluded people. This ensures we engage with people who may not usually be part of traditional research.



Ground up approach

Identifying experiences and challenges at the heart of affected communities and making sure we're asking the right questions



Exposure and empathy

Greater opportunity for *direct* interaction between policymakers and community members leading to better empathy and understanding



Creating a dialogue

Where more traditional forms of research seek to *listen* to consumers, PAR creates a *dialogue* and two-way engagement with consumers



Empowerment and purpose

Shaping, conducting and delivering research for policymakers/decision-makers can be a source of empowerment for community members, creating a more meaningful relationship between policy and the communities it affects.



Timelines for research

Multiple phases of PAR may necessitate longer timelines than more traditional research forms and will need to be accounted for through pre-planning in the policy cycle.



Aligning community expectations with policymaker delivery

Consumer-led, ground up approach to defining scope and objectives of research risks a potential mismatch in expectations of the community and what policymakers can deliver. It is important to co-create and communicate throughout the process.



Replicability

PAR tends to focus on the lived experiences of specific communities which may limit ability to generalise to other communities and populations. It is important to triangulate with other data sources to paint a holistic picture of a certain policy issue.

- In PAR, it is people from the community who are designing the research and people from the community participating in the research.
- D&I is built into the methodology from the very beginning. PAR looks to recruit members of the community who not only have direct experience of a social problem, but a cross-section of other experiences like disability/racial background/age.
- Enables access to seldom-heard communities and creates opportunity to uncover insights in a more meaningful, accessible and relatable way.

Ofgem's Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

"We will gather customer insight to get the views of particular communities that we think may be particularly affected and ensuring the views of under-represented groups are made clear to our senior decision makers"

- PAR plays an important role in connecting communities to decision-makers/policy-makers
- As a methodology, it encourages organisations to design fair and inclusive policies that represent and reflect a range of diverse perspectives and experiences (particularly important for policies/initiatives that directly impact and affect communities and consumers)
- Important to work through the practical considerations and potential mitigation strategies to feasibly and successfully carry out a PAR project

Final reflections on the impact of the Net-Zero project



Right Now

Ofgem should commission peer research where low income consumers identify ways to increase their trust in smart meters and Energy Smart Appliances.

By 2025

- Ofgem should develop a green empowerment strategy, actioning a range of co-designed solutions to overcome low income consumers' lack of trust in smart technology
- Long term investment by the government is needed to support low income consumers to afford, understand and use smart technology.

Technology for good

TOYNBEE HALL

Budget

£ 0.85

25%

£ 0.11

£ 1.30

Ofgem is the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets. We are a non-ministerial government department and an independent National Regulatory Authority, recognised by EU Directives. Our role is to protect consumers now and in the future by working to deliver a greener, fairer energy system.

We do this by:

- **working with Government, industry and consumer groups to deliver a net zero economy at the lowest cost to consumers.**
- **stamping out sharp and bad practice, ensuring fair treatment for all consumers, especially the vulnerable.**
- **enabling competition and innovation, which drives down prices and results in new products and services for consumers.**