



2

cities

8

**metropolitan
boroughs**

2.8

million inhabitants

1.2

million households

4

**local authorities
among the UK's top
25 most deprived**

Challenges encountered

1. COVID-19

The final part of the Manchester Living Lab was undertaken entirely during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown restrictions. As such, it necessitated far-reaching modifications and innovations in urban public engagement and energy interventions. The Lab was, in effect, the first of its kind to provide energy advice to vulnerable citizens through remote methods during a pandemic, across a wide urban metropolitan region. The Living Lab adapted its methods to an online working format, so as to ensure compliance with COVID-19 restrictions. Instead of physical energy advisor visits, the Lab set up a phone-based energy consultation service. The service was independent of the LEAP scheme that had previously been integral to the Living Lab. Energy cafés were also held online in the form of drop-in consultations available to all citizens. As such, the lab generated valuable insights about fuel poverty and energy vulnerability challenges faced by low-income households during the pandemic.

2. Technological and IT challenges

In the first two iterations of the Lab (until March 2020), we also encountered specific challenges regarding the application of IT methodologies. The Lab functioned under the auspices of an already established IT scheme, as the advisors already used a distinct and well-built IT architecture (relying on the Zoho app). Rather than creating a new IT platform, we adapted the Zoho app and existing advice information system to the needs of the Lab, by adding a series of questions to the app, and generating data directly from them. The data processed in this manner was also used to generate a novel, free of charge advice web portal for general public use, directed at the general public (the portal is available at www.energyadvice.info).

3. Issues beyond energy advice

The baseline assessment revealed that many energy-related household challenges are connected with income poverty and other forms of vulnerability and deprivation, beyond the remit of the Lab. However, their visibility becomes apparent 'at the doorstep', during an energy advisor visit. The energy advisor visits and consultations often identified situations in which major fire safety, mental health and poor housing conditions were present. In such situations, we were able to provide multiple referrals to onward services, including health and social support as appropriate.

Methodology

Recruitment of Lab participants



Benchmarking



Market segmentation



Focus groups



Home energy advisor visits



Energy cafés



Information campaigns



Information centres



ICT tools



Impacts monitoring



Energy advisor home visits

- Over the lifetime of the Lab, 565 households received specialist advice from dedicated advisors, including 368 home visits in the first two iterations of the Lab, and 197 remote consultations in the third iterations. Overall, these households were estimated to contain 1085 people.
- The lab resulted in the installation of a total of 686 'small measures' such as efficient light bulbs, draught excluders, letterbox covers, radiator foil, draught proofing of windows and doors, shower aerators; as well as switches in energy and gas suppliers to tariff schemes better suited to individual consumer circumstances.
- A total of 341 referrals to further services were also implemented, including the Warm Home Discount, Priority Services Register and Citizens Advice Bureau.
- Altogether, the Lab achieved an estimated annual bill reduction of 8.47 per cent, or £91 per consumer.
- Before the pandemic, there was a significant decrease in the relative number of households who reported being unable to pay their bills on time. This percentage share went down by more than half during both the first and second living lab iteration (which ended in March 2020). However, there was a doubling of this rate in the third iteration – largely attributable to Covid-19.



Energy cafés

- There were a total of 5 physical and 5 online energy cafés, encompassing a total of 271 people. The online energy cafés took place during the pandemic.
- An overwhelming majority of participants at the cafés thought that they received highly useful information and advice from the specialist advisors present. Information on energy saving measures and tariff switching was particularly valuable.
- Before the pandemic, numerous participants stated that they enjoyed the interaction with others in their community, suggesting that the value of energy cafés goes beyond the provision of energy advice to encompass important issues, e.g. reducing social isolation and increasing social capital.



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