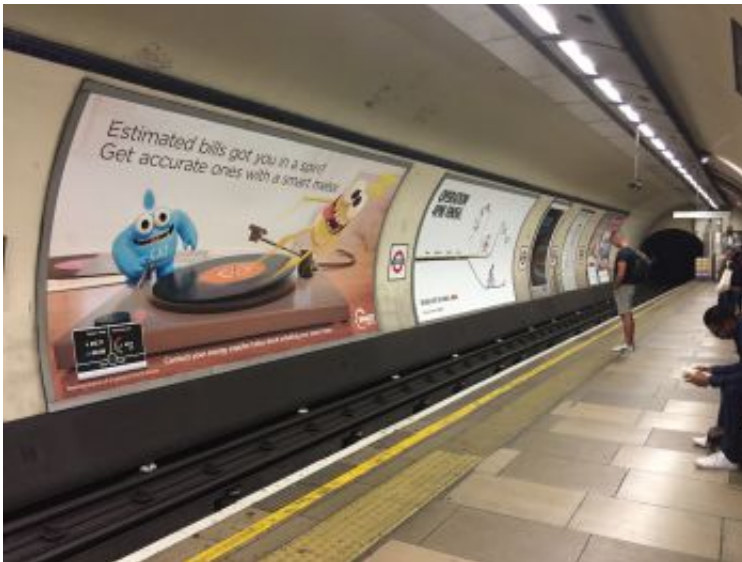


'Confusion and resistance' slows down UK smart meter rollout

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Smart meter campaign poster in London Underground. Credit: Benjamin Sovacool

Lack of consumer engagement, insufficient information, and inadequate attention to vulnerability has slowed down the UK roll-out of energy smart meters, according to a new study by researchers at the University of Sussex.

The £11 billion smart meter programme, which is supported by a £100-million marketing campaign, has not met its targets due to consumer apathy and confusion, especially in the case of vulnerable

people, say the researchers.

The UK government planned to install smart meters in every home by 2020 to reduce national household [energy](#) consumption by 5-15 percent, and thereby help meet the UK's climate change targets. Smart meters are digital gas and electricity meters that connect households to suppliers and feature a home display that aims to help people better understand their energy use.

The programme, officially called Smart Meter Implementation Programme (SMIP), is the largest government-run information technology project in history. Yet, a year in, energy providers had only managed to install the meters in seven percent of homes. To hit the target by 2020, suppliers would need to install 40,000 smart meters per day for the duration of the programme.

Professor Benjamin Sovacool, lead author of the study and director of the Sussex Energy Group, pointed out: "We have recently seen how the government had to backtrack on its ambitions to make installation in every home obligatory; they are basically admitting a degree of failure.

"Consumer confusion and even resistance to the programme exist, which is a clear sign that they need to improve consumer engagement and the provision of information about the benefits of the technology. This is especially true when it comes to vulnerable classes of people, such as the elderly and those less educated."

The paper, published in *Energy Policy*, argues that discussions around technical glitches have partially obscured societal issues that need to be addressed for a more successful campaign. The researchers looked at two primary sources of data, a systemic review of the academic literature on smart meters as well as participant observation of seven major events on the SMIP during 2015-16.

Dr Kirsten Jenkins, Research Fellow in Energy Justice and Transitions at the University of Sussex, adds that another benefit to the study is that it helps demystify the smart meter programme. As she clarifies: "I come at this paper both as a researcher and as a potential user of a smart meter in my own home, and one that despite initially being told I could upgrade now, was later informed there was no availability in my area. For many the SMIP has remained something of a mystery.

"Our study makes an important step towards revealing its dynamics and highlighting the necessity of not only technological advancement, but thoroughly considered social integration that is conscious of both new and old social vulnerabilities."

The new technology is not only supposed to increase awareness around household energy needs, but also make households more energy efficient and reduce energy bills. However, the paper argues that rather than engaging consumers about the potential benefits, the technology has only generated 'confusion and resistance' in many households. There is little awareness of the benefits or understanding of how the technology works, even in those households where the technology has been installed.

Dr Paula Kivimaa, Senior Research Fellow at the University of Sussex, emphasizes that the actions of users and consumers could greatly compromise the success of the programme. As she states: "Given the removal of several important policy instruments targeting energy efficiency and demand reduction in buildings in 2015, the SMIP has a crucial role in advancing these policy targets. However, the failure to engage consumers effectively puts the success of this programme at risk, and, thus requires speedy and effective action on behalf of those in charge of its implementation."

Dr Sabine Hielscher, a Research Fellow at Sussex, comments "The high expected benefits associated with the roll-out of smart meters have been

kept alive and their achievements have stayed optimistic within the UK government over the last decade. Although the SMIP has been increasingly scrutinised and uncertainties surrounding expected benefits persisted, it will be interesting to see how the [smart meter](#) roll-out will unfold over the next few years."

More information: Benjamin K. Sovacool et al. Vulnerability and resistance in the United Kingdom's smart meter transition, *Energy Policy* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.enpol.2017.07.037](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2017.07.037)

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