

Early consumer experiences of smart meters

July 2018



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About Citizens Advice

The Citizens Advice service provides free, independent, confidential and impartial advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities. It values diversity, promotes equality and challenges discrimination.

On 1 April 2014, the Citizens Advice service took on the powers of Consumer Futures to become the statutory representative for energy consumers across Great Britain. The service aims:

- to provide the advice people need for the problems they face
- to improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives.

The Citizens Advice service is a network of nearly 300 independent advice centres that provide free, impartial advice from more than 2,900 locations in England and Wales, including GPs' surgeries, hospitals, community centres, county courts and magistrates courts, and mobile services both in rural areas and to serve particular dispersed groups.

In 2017, Citizens Advice Service helped fix 163,000 energy problems through our local network and 61,000 through our Consumer Service Helpline. Our Extra Help Unit specialist case handling unit resolved 8,367 cases on behalf of consumers in vulnerable circumstances, and their Ask the Adviser telephone service handled 2,593 calls from other advice providers in need of specialist energy advice.

Since April 2012 we have also operated the Citizens Advice Consumer Service, formerly run as Consumer Direct by the Office for Fair Trading (OFT). This telephone helpline covers Great Britain and provides free, confidential and impartial advice on all consumer issues.

Key points

In 2016, Citizens Advice commissioned research into the early consumer experiences of smart meters¹. This research found that whilst there was high levels of consumer satisfaction, there were also some areas of concern. For example, a lack of awareness that switching with a SMETS1 meter could result in loss of functionality. Two years and approximately seven million more smart meters² later, we are keen to see what progress has been made and whether the smart meter consumer experience has changed.

The smart meter roll-out is one of the government's most ambitious infrastructure programmes and is being delivered by energy suppliers. As with any major infrastructure project, it is expected that unanticipated challenges will emerge during the course of the roll-out. The way the energy industry chooses to respond to these challenges will not only shape the experience consumers have, but it will also serve to enhance or further diminish how people feel about energy companies. The media continues to scrutinise energy suppliers and how they behave during the roll-out. If negative media stories dominate the public's perception and understanding of smart meters, it is likely to hamper uptake and increase costs for all.

It is therefore in everyone's interest to ensure consumer experiences are positive - and for the most part, this appears to be the case. Our research found that 80% of people who had a smart meter installed were satisfied with the installation process.

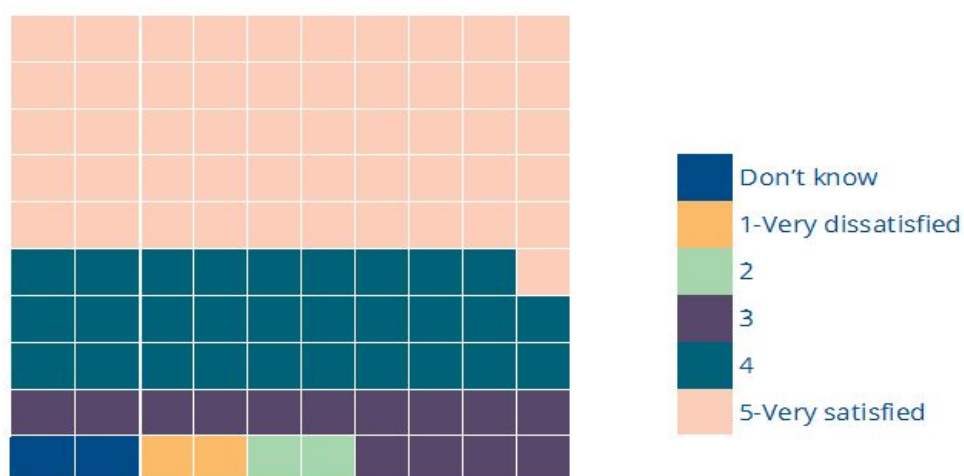


Fig 1. Levels of satisfaction with the installation experience

¹ Citizens Advice, [Early consumer experiences of smart meters 2016](#)

² BEIS, [Smart Meter Statistics Q2 2016 - Q4 2017](#)

But our findings also suggest that not everyone has experienced the promised benefits of smart metering. Some of the immediate benefits of smart meters, as advertised by industry, are access to usage data and accurate billing. If suppliers don't or can't deliver on these benefits, it is inevitable there will be disappointment. Citizens Advice continues to call for stronger consumer protections to reflect the expectations people have of their smart meter.

The research also found that some consumers had problems with the installation process. For example, those who had multiple installation appointments, were not able to have a smart meter installed or had an appliance that was condemned, meaning they could not use it anymore.

The scale of the roll-out means nearly every home will have a smart meter installed in a relatively compressed timescale. For energy suppliers, this means coming across a range of difficult installation problems, given the huge variation and types of homes across Great Britain. Citizens Advice has been working with suppliers to understand and learn from existing installation experiences. We expect suppliers to maintain a high standard of customer service throughout the smart meter installation process, and ensure that they support consumers who encounter issues in a clear, consistent and efficient way.

It is vital that the energy industry consider coordinated responses across both supply and network companies where appropriate and identify where there is no clear resolution pathway for industry to take. Given the pace at which suppliers are expected to deliver the roll-out, a timely response to identifying and resolving gaps in processes is crucial.

Finally, we expect that during the smart meter roll-out, consumers are given all of the relevant information they need to make informed decisions. Our findings show that the implementation of the Data Access and Privacy Framework³ for respondents has been inconsistent. In addition, only 27% of respondents are aware of the possibility of losing smart functionality upon switching.

³[Data Access and Privacy Framework](#)

Recommendations

1. The data access and privacy framework is due to be reviewed by Government this year. The Government and the regulator should work together to ensure the upcoming review strengthens the current obligations on suppliers to inform consumers and ensures that consumers understand their data access rights. It is also crucial that both consider what suppliers are doing to communicate the limitations of SMETS1 meters, in particular the limitations like potential loss of functionality, after switching suppliers.
2. We recently requested information from energy suppliers about 'difficult installations'. Industry must work together and coordinate action on these types of installations. Where possible, this should include the development and communication of a consistent approach.
3. The scale of the roll-out will mean more consumers will have appliances condemned after a smart meter installation safety check. In an essential market like energy, this could have detrimental effects on consumers in vulnerable situations. As a minimum, no consumer in a vulnerable situation should be left without a means to cook or heat and light their homes after having an appliance condemned.
4. 15% of smart meter users received a shock bill, following a smart meter installation. Citizens Advice will continue to monitor the scale of this issue and industry should too. Where the scale and risk increases, the voluntary principles, agreed by most of the market, should be reviewed to ensure they are fit for purpose.
5. Our research indicates that some consumers are still being asked to submit meter readings after a smart meter has been installed. All consumers should benefit from accurate bills and energy suppliers should seek to address these issues promptly. To appropriately incentivise this, the regulator should introduce rules to prevent all back billing for smart meter customers. This would ensure everyone benefits from their smart meters.

Deciding to get a smart meter

As the smart meter roll-out begins in earnest energy suppliers will be gearing up to install many tens of thousands of meters a day. At the same time, suppliers will need to ensure that demand for these smart meters will meet supply. If it doesn't, it could lead to cost inefficiencies that are ultimately paid for by consumers.

It is essential, therefore, that energy suppliers carefully consider the best way to create demand for smart meters amongst their customers. We understand that suppliers are trialling multiple methods to engage consumers, with varying levels of efficacy. It is promising to see that, where possible, learning from these trials is being shared. Energy suppliers must be mindful of the consumer experience, regularly reviewing and improving the techniques they use to engage consumers and encourage the take up of smart meters.

More than half of our research participants with a smart meter had it installed within the last year. The proportion of customers being 'told' their supplier intends to install a smart meter has increased from the previous year, which reflects the shift toward more energy suppliers using deemed appointments to set up smart meter installations.

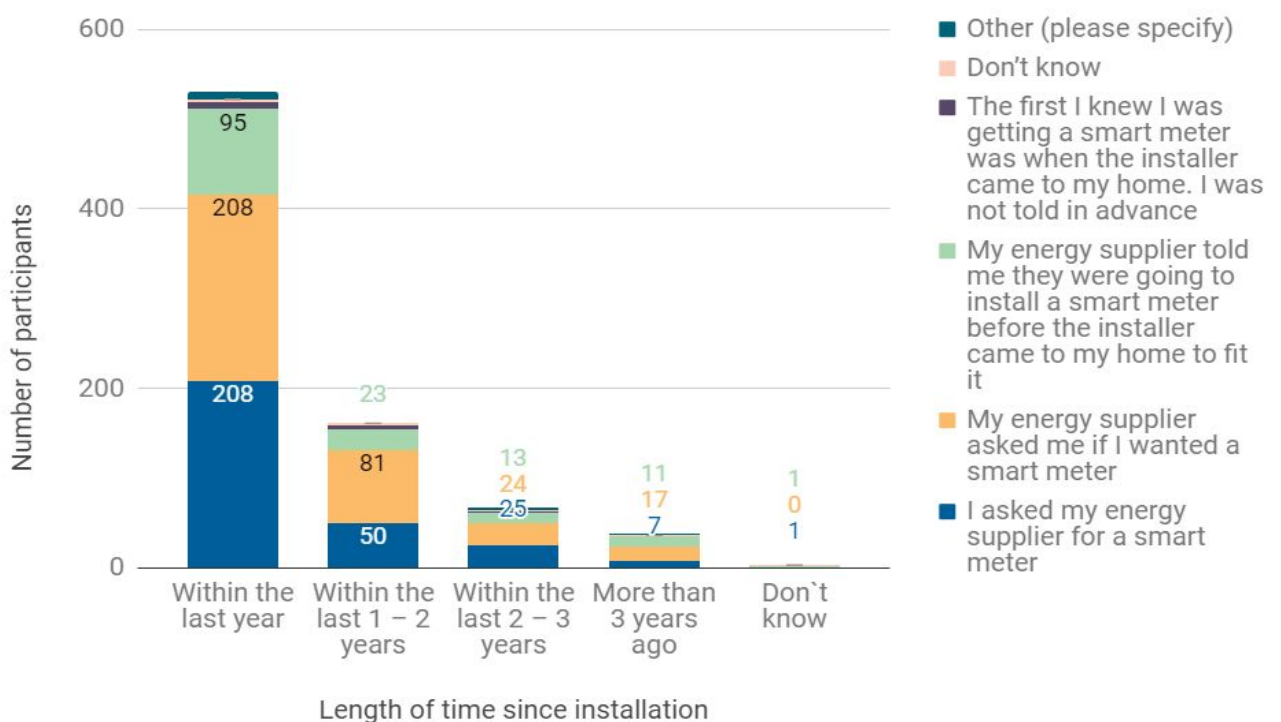


Fig. 2 shows how people came to have a smart meter by time since installation

But for a successful roll-out, millions will have to say ‘yes’ to having a smart meter installed, regardless of how they came to have the conversation. For those who have already said ‘yes’, the most common reasons were to obtain accurate energy bills or to avoid having to provide meter readings. This is hardly surprising and resonates with current marketing efforts.

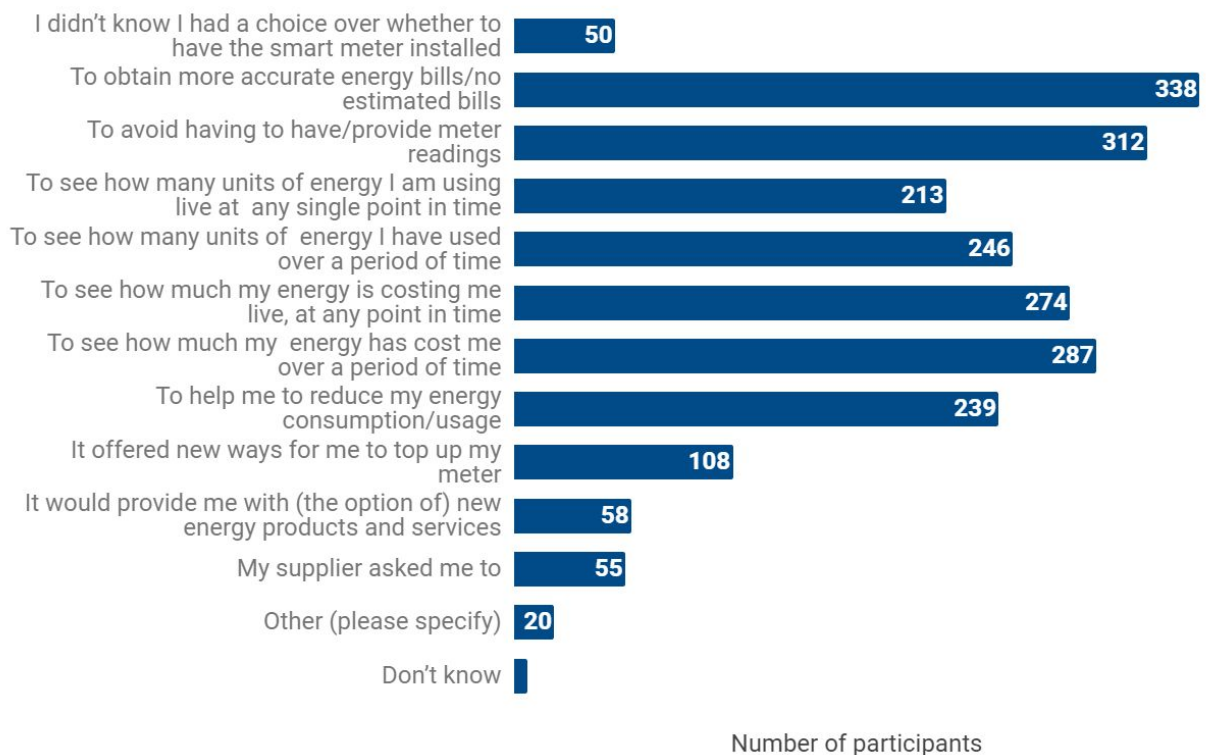


Fig. 3 identifies the reasons⁴ why people may have had a smart meter installed.

Only 7% of respondents told us that they had a smart meter installed because of the wider benefits of smart meters - in particular innovative offers, services or products that could become available. This mirrors what respondents thought the benefits of smart meters were with a similar percentage identifying the potential for new products or services as a benefit.

We also asked non-smart meter users if they had been offered or considered asking for smart meters before. Over 40%⁵ had. We then asked why they did not have a smart meter.

⁴ Respondents were able to select more than one reason

⁵ n=429

Whilst there were many who didn't want to have a smart meter installed, there were also a significant number who were either waiting to have a smart meter installed or intended to have one installed when they had the time.

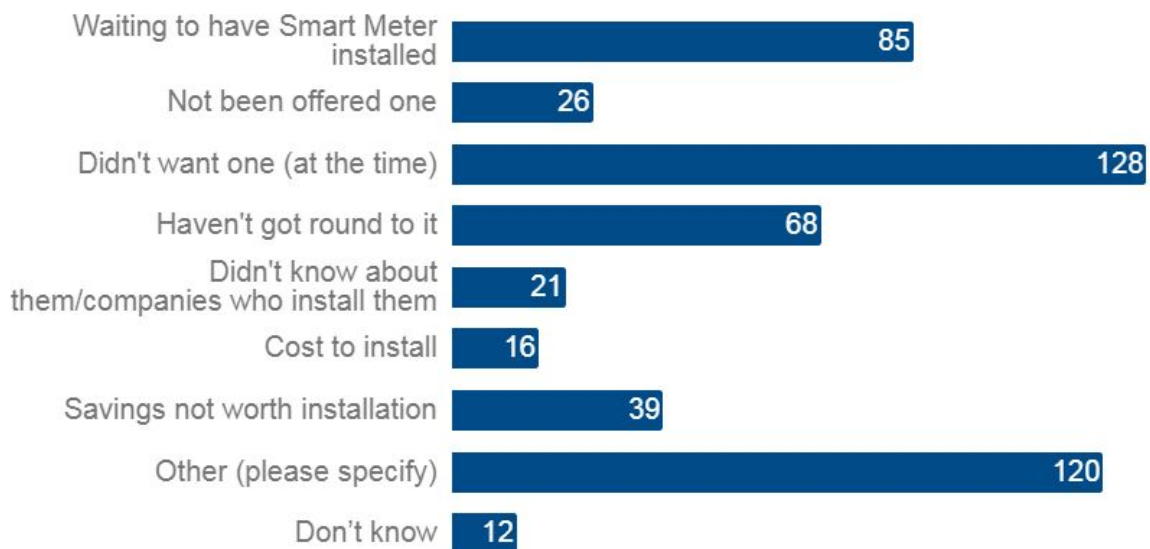


Fig. 4 identifies reasons⁶ why people have not had a smart meter installed, yet.

120 people specified they did not have a smart meter for another reason. On further analysis of these comments, we found that a third of those who had selected 'Other' had a failed installation or had been told they could not have a smart meter installed yet.

"Our electricity supplier came out to install the smart meter but there were technical difficulties. They haven't been back since then. That was 13 months ago."⁷

Whilst industry has a challenge trying to persuade people to have a smart meter installed, it also has a challenge to overcome other barriers to installing smart meters. We expect some of these issues will be resolved when suppliers begin to roll-out SMETS2 meters, but some will still require further thought. For example, where there may be logistical difficulties in accessing the meter. In the meantime consumers should be informed about what's happening and, if possible, when the problem will be resolved.

⁶ Participants were allowed to select more than one reason

⁷ Comment from a participant, during the quantitative research

A sixth of the respondents who selected 'Other' told us that they didn't have a smart meter for reasons of privacy, safety, health concerns or that they were unable to have one installed, whilst renting. Dispelling common myths or concerns will need to be addressed when trying to meet roll-out targets.

The installation experience

For the most part, people who have had smart meters installed rate their experience highly. This was even the case where people have had an appliance condemned or required multiple appointments to have a smart meter installed.



Despite this high level of satisfaction, it's still true that nearly a fifth of participants did not have a straightforward installation experience. 18% of smart meter users said they had to have more than one installation visit to have their smart meter installed. We can appreciate, in some scenarios, predicting when suppliers might need to abort an installation can be difficult. But multiple installation appointments are not only disruptive for consumers, they can also increase the cost of the roll-out.

Government and industry are working to reduce the number of aborted installations and Citizens Advice is hopeful improvements will be made. In the meantime, we expect industry to provide clear communication to consumers throughout any unexpected delays or issues during installation, and address problems effectively and efficiently.

Our research also found that 12% of consumers with a smart meter⁸ had an appliance condemned during installation because of safety concerns. 45% of

⁸ n=121 (12% of total smart meter users)

these consumers identified themselves or someone else in their household as having a long term illness or disability⁹.

Identifying appliances with possible safety issues is, on the whole, a good thing for consumers. But it's important that consumers are given information, advice and support about next steps. At the moment, the support given to consumers doesn't appear to be consistent across industry or even amongst customers of the same supplier.

Jane asked her supplier for a smart meter. It was installed by a third party installer. The actual installation went fine, but she later found that the boiler was not working. She spoke to her supplier who have said she has to talk to the third party installer. Jane has no heating at the moment and would like to talk to someone about how to deal with the issue.¹⁰

Citizens Advice strongly recommends that energy suppliers and network companies work together to agree minimum standards of support for consumers who have had an appliance condemned. We would expect that, as a minimum, consumers in vulnerable circumstances should be offered alternative means to cook and heat and light their homes if they need them.

⁹ This compares to 31% of all respondents identifying themselves or another member of their household as disabled/living with a long term illness.

¹⁰ Casenote from Consumer Service Helpline, December 2017

Understanding data choices

Concerns about smart metering data, including the energy supplier's access and use of consumers usage data, can prevent some people from having smart meters installed.

"They have all the details, like when are you using it and what you're doing. My concerns are when you're going on a holiday, they know that you're not using your electricity.¹¹"

However, even some consumers who have smart meters express concerns about sharing their usage data. Our research found that more than a quarter of all respondents¹² (26.4%), both smart meter users and non-smart meter users, were concerned about how suppliers use smart meter energy usage data. This level of concern was starker for younger age groups, with a disparity of more than 12% between the oldest and youngest age group.

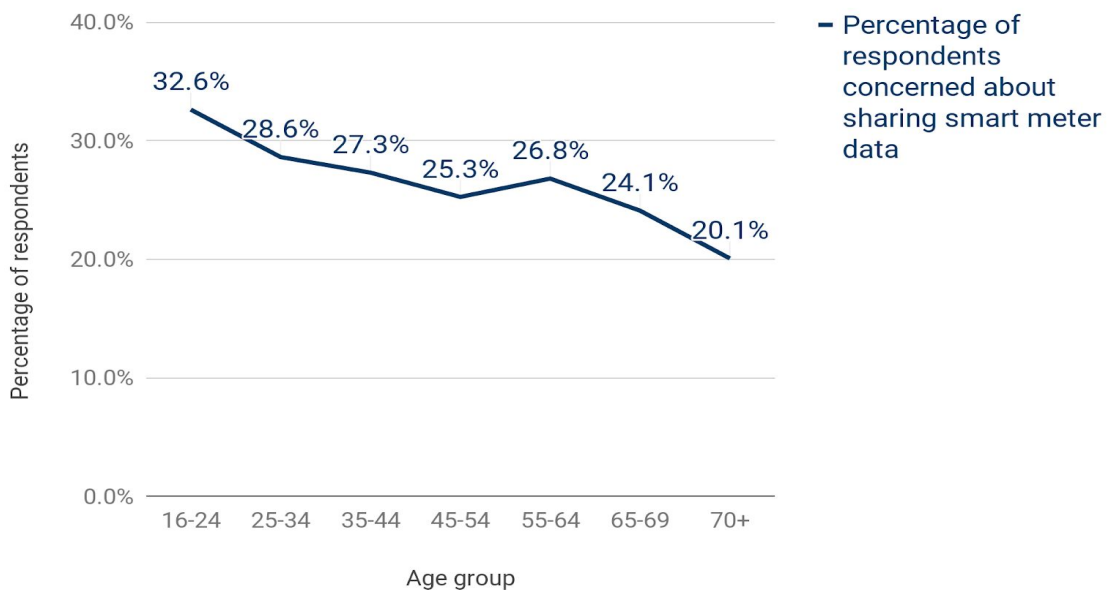


Fig. 5 shows the relative difference in concern about sharing smart meter data between age groups.

¹¹ Comment from non-smart meter with data sharing concerns from the qualitative research. The participant was later reassured after explaining some aspects of the data access and privacy framework (i.e. ability to reduce the frequency of meter readings)

¹² n=1837

There was also some difference between smart meter users and non-smart meter users and their levels of concern when sharing their energy usage data.

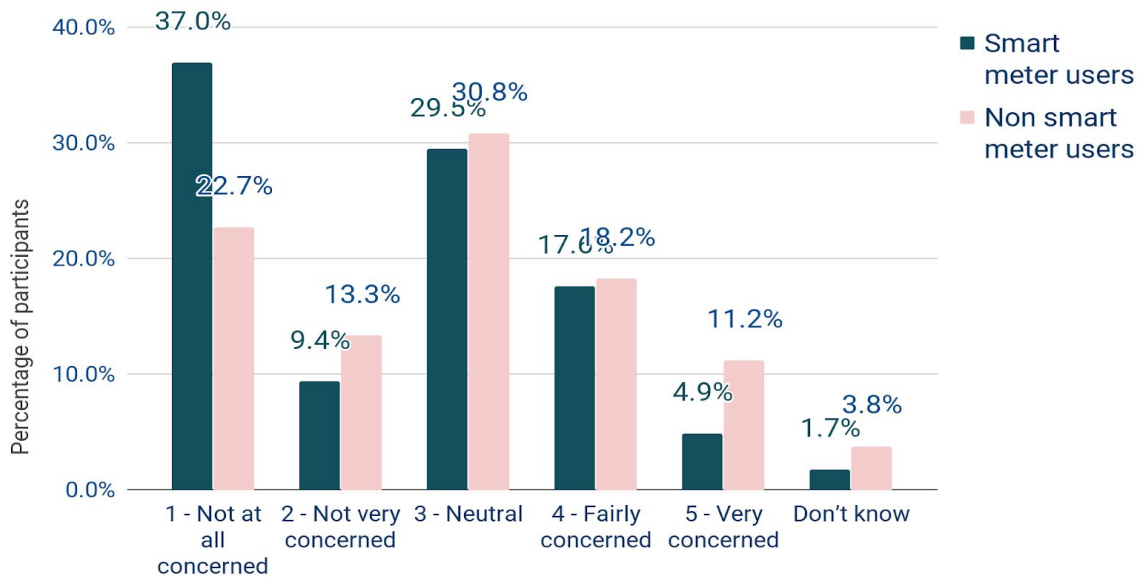


Fig. 6 shows the difference in levels of concern between smart meter users and non-smart meter users.

However, most participants (59%) felt reassured when it was explained they could control how often suppliers can access their energy data (with a minimum of one meter reading per month), and that explicit consent would be required to access more than one meter reading per day. Even participants who did not say they were concerned felt reassured after being told they can control the frequency that their data is shared. Smart meter users were more likely to be reassured (64%) than non-smart meter users (54%). But, perhaps more importantly, 60% of all consumers who had expressed concern were reassured by these protections.

The Data Access and Privacy Framework requires suppliers to explain which data they are accessing, why they are accessing it, and explain to the consumer what choices they have. This includes giving consumers the opportunity to object to having their data collected more frequently than once a month. It also requires energy suppliers to proactively contact consumers on a yearly basis, to provide them with the option to change their usage data sharing option. Our research found that:

- Just under half (47%) of all smart meter users knew how regularly they shared energy usage data with their supplier.
- Almost 35% of smart meter users could not remember their energy supplier explaining the different data sharing options and asking for permission to take readings more often than once per day.
- And of the 267 smart meter users (who have had their smart meter installed for longer than 1 year), 71% had not been contacted by their supplier in regards to their current data choices and to give them an opportunity to amend them.

Post-installation experiences: accessing the benefits

In 2016, the government published a cost-benefit analysis¹³ of the smart meter roll-out. This analysis estimated the monetised consumer benefits to total £5.3bn, of which 99% was predicated on consumers being able to reduce their energy consumption.

Actively engaging with energy data is an important part of this, and our research suggests there has been some positive interaction, to date. 84% of smart meter users were viewing their energy usage, with some using more than one method to do so.

77% used their **in-home display (513)**



25% used **desktop (169)**



15% used a **mobile app (99)**



¹³ BEIS, 2016, [Cost benefit analysis: the smart meter roll-out](#)

Fig. 7 shows the percentage of smart meter users using an IHD, website or app to view their energy data.

And three quarters of those who did view their data, were looking at it least once a week.

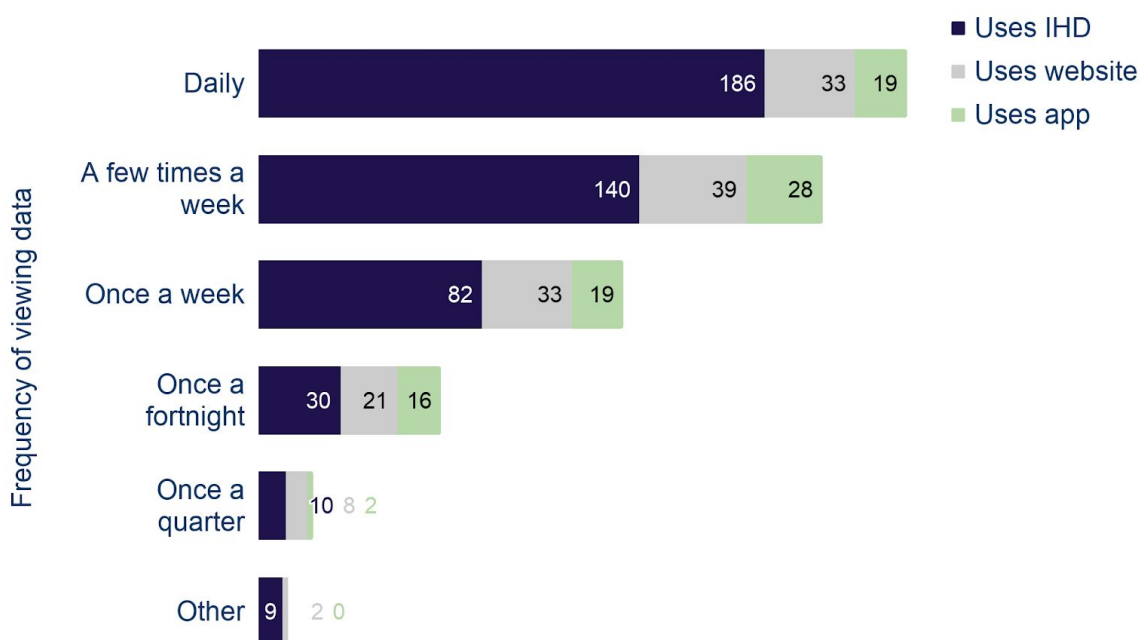


Fig. 8 shows how frequently smart meter users viewed their energy data and by what method.

“Whenever I go in the kitchen I’m always glancing at [the IHD]. It just draws your attention, because it’s lit.”¹⁴

Overall, 55%¹⁵ of smart meter users believed they had been able to reduce their energy consumption¹⁶ and 17% were unsure. But this leaves 28% of smart meter users, who said having a smart meter had not helped them reduce their consumption at all¹⁷.

And this is just one of the potential benefits of smart meters that not all users were able to access. 22% of users also reported still having to provide meter

¹⁴ Comment from smart meter user, referring to their IHD.

¹⁵ n=442

¹⁶ Of those who believed they had, 93% were looking at their energy usage and 75% looked at their energy usage at least once a week.

¹⁷ Those who responded this way were more likely to identify as male (n= 145 male vs. n=81 female). The demographics were also disproportionately older.

readings, despite the fact nearly 1 in 3 of them told us that not having to provide them was one of their main motivations for having a smart meter installed.

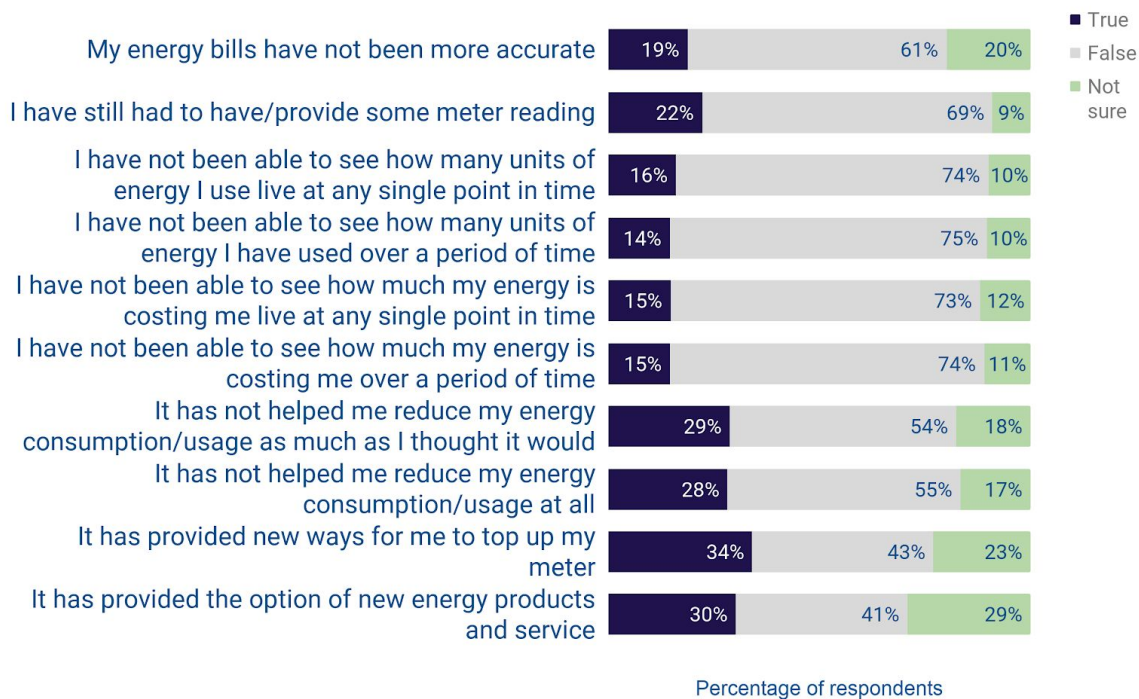


Fig. 9 shows the number of respondents who agreed with the list of statements

Citizens Advice is concerned that where there are barriers preventing suppliers from receiving meter readings, consumers risk receiving inaccurate/estimated bills. Smart meters are marketed on a promise to ending these bills. We would expect energy suppliers to rectify the issue where possible and to manage the risk of potential back bills.

But preventing back bills isn't the only reason to address this issue. Smart meters are the 'building blocks' that could transform the energy market. To really achieve this, government and industry must ensure that the technology works, allowing all consumers to access new offers and services in the future.

Post-installation experiences: shock billing

We are aware that the journey from estimated to accurate bills may not be smooth for everyone. If a consumer has been paying bills based on estimated readings, their first bill based on an accurate usage after having a smart meter installed might come as a shock.

Our research found 15% of users received a shock bill from their supplier after having a smart meter installed - 63% of them had been paying bills based on estimates before getting their smart meter. This issue disproportionately affected younger users, with 59% of under 35 year olds getting a shock bill.

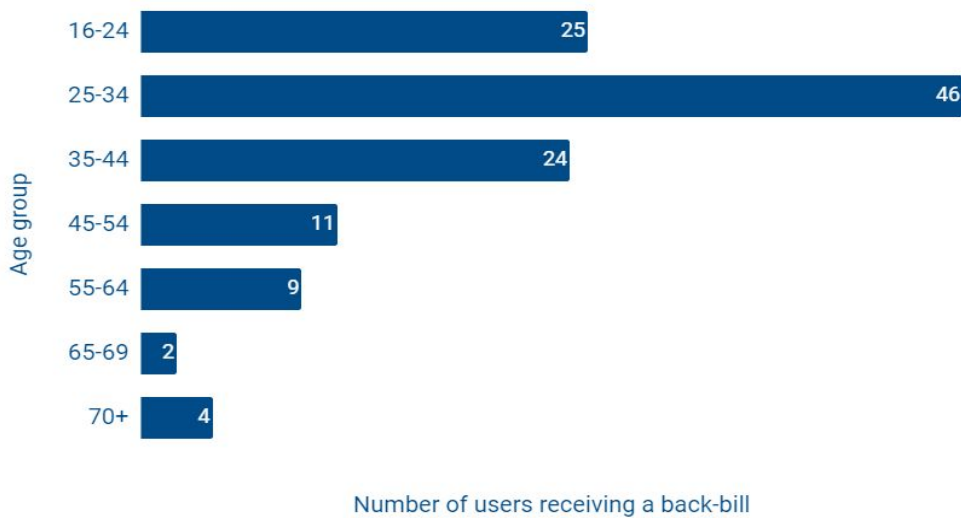


Fig. 10 shows the variance by age of those receiving a back bill after having a smart meter installed

75% of people who had been getting bills based on estimates had been warned they could receive a shock bill by their energy supplier. More than a quarter of respondents (28%) had been asked to pay for more than a year's usage.

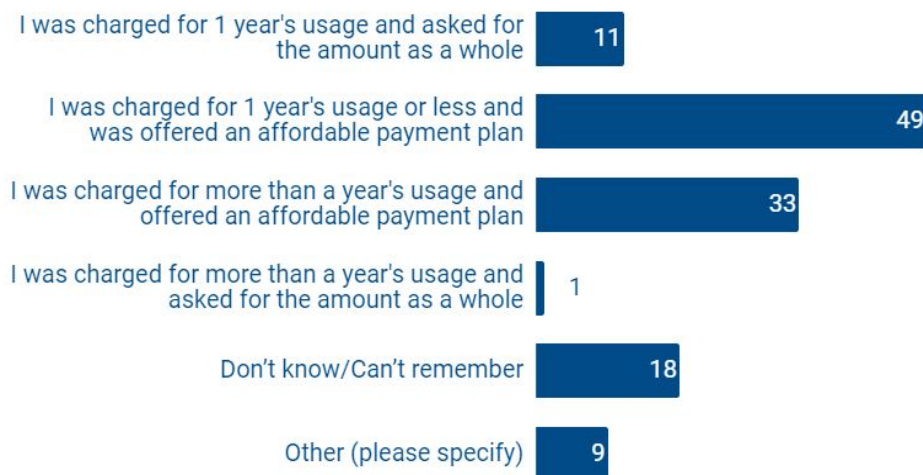


Fig. 11 shows how many consumers received the following levels of support from their energy suppliers, following their back-bill.

For some people, an unexpected shock bill can be difficult to deal with. Citizens Advice has worked with the government and industry to agree how suppliers should support customers who get a shock bill after they have had a smart meter installed. These are voluntary principles and include taking steps to receive meter readings prior to the installation and handling expectations following the installation of a smart meter.

As more and more people have smart meters installed, Citizens Advice will continue to work with industry to monitor how suppliers are communicating and supporting customers who get a shock bill. It is essential that these voluntary principles are adhered to and reviewed to ensure they remain fit for purpose.

What more should be done?

Installing smart meters in homes is an essential step towards modernising the energy system of Great Britain. Smart meters should enable the energy industry to be more efficient and offer new products and services to consumers. We found most people were satisfied with their smart meter how it was installed and being able to access the immediate benefits.

But, this research also found that a minority of people have experienced adversity at some stage of the smart meter installation process. If the issues raised in this report are not addressed promptly, with clear communication and support made available for vulnerable consumers, there is a very real risk that consumers will 'blame' the smart meter, and fail to realise the benefits that smart metering could bring. Due to the scale of the roll-out, these problems could potentially impact millions of people¹⁸ and it is essential that industry acts quickly to resolve the issues raised in this report.

¹⁸ Currently 11 million smart meters have been installed in domestic properties. This leaves approximately 39 million left to be installed. Assuming the majority are dual fuel installations and that the findings can be extrapolated, millions could be affected by either installation issues, billing issues or being unable to access the benefits of smart.

Recommendations

1. The data access and privacy framework is due to be reviewed by Government this year. The Government and the regulator should work together to ensure the upcoming review strengthens the current obligations on suppliers to inform consumers and ensures that consumers understand their data access rights. It is also crucial that both consider what suppliers are doing to communicate the limitations of SMETS1 meters, in particular the limitations like potential loss of functionality, after switching suppliers.
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4. 15% of smart meter users received a shock bill, following a smart meter installation. Citizens Advice will continue to monitor the scale of this issue and industry should too. Where the scale and risk increases, the voluntary principles, agreed by most of the market, should be reviewed to ensure they are fit for purpose.
5. Our research indicates that some consumers are still being asked to submit meter readings after a smart meter has been installed. All consumers should benefit from accurate bills and energy suppliers should seek to address these issues promptly. To appropriately incentivise this, the regulator should introduce rules to prevent all back billing for smart meter customers. This would ensure everyone benefits from their smart meters.

Technical Specification

This technical specification has been completed by DJS, who conducted this research on behalf of Citizens Advice. It outlines the aims and methodology of this research as well as how this data should be considered.

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1. Background

In October 2017, Citizens Advice commissioned DJS to carry out research, exploring the smart meter experiences of consumers.

Research Objectives

The specific objectives of the research were to consider:

- views on supplier interactions – how they smart meters are ‘sold’ and appointments are established;
- reasons why / why not consumers choose to have a smart meter installed
- their understanding of rights, in particular their data choices and any concerns around sharing usage data;
- understanding of the impact on future supply choices – i.e. loss of functionality;
- experiences of installation – number of visits required, advice on energy efficiency, issues with condemned appliances and subsequent support;
- whether consumers could access the benefits of smart; and
- experiences relating to billing – continued estimated bills, ‘back bills’

Methodology

The research used a multi-stage approach:

Overview of approach



10

Quantitative survey

DJS carried out an online survey with participants recruited via a panel and also carried out an offline boost, using a CAPI methodology to ensure that vulnerable and offline participants were included.

Data from the ONS indicates that 90% of the UK population are online, and that the groups highlighted above, are those least likely to be represented online. With this in mind we recommend that 10% of our sample uses an offline methodology to capture views and experiences of these groups, in particular over 75+/low income households/disabilities.

Online survey

The online survey was conducted using consumer panels with consumers in England, Wales and Scotland who have not taken part in research about smart meters in the last 6 months.

Participants were either classified as a smart meter user or non-smart meter user. Smart meter users have either gas, electricity or a combined smart meter installed and were present when the meter was installed.

Note: A further question (with visual prompt) was asked to confirm that smart meter users have a smart meter not a clip on energy display.

In addition to the survey questions we asked and collated demographic information about each participant, the energy supplier and type of billing (credit / prepayment) for sample management and analysis purposes.

This fieldwork took place from 28th November – 9th December following an initial pilot to validate the questionnaire.

CAPI survey

The face to face survey was conducted in home by a member of the DJS Research field team using CAPI (Computer aided personal interview) with the interviewer inputting responses directly into a tablet. The data was then directly uploaded to our system.

Participants matched the sample for the online survey with the additional criteria that they accessed the internet less than once a week.

This fieldwork took place from 7th December – 21st December following an initial pilot to validate the questionnaire.

Sample size

It is important that the research is statistically significant and as a result a large enough sample is required for the research.

Sample size recommendations are based on margin of error:

Table 1 – Margin of error

Sample size	Margin of error (95%) at 50% response
250	+/- 6.2%
500	+/-4.4%
1000	+/-3.1%
2000	+/-2.2%

Minimum sample quotas of 1,500 online participants and 150 CAPI participants were set. The online quota was split into a minimum of 750 smart meter users / 750 non smart meter users.

The 150 offline CAPI participants were split into a minimum of 30 smart meter users with the remaining being non smart meter users (maximum of 120 participants).

The actual total number of interviews achieved was:

Table 2 – Sample achieved

	Number of interviews achieved
Online	1,629
CAPI	208
Total	1,837

2. Profile of respondents

Gender

The sample is closely matched to the UK adult population in terms of gender.

Table 3 – Gender of respondents

	Sample size	Sample proportion
Male	883	48.2%
Female	950	51.8%

Age

The sample is closely matched to the UK adult population in terms of Age. All age categories are within +/-5% of the UK population.

Table 4 – Age of respondents

	Sample size	Sample proportion
16-24	236	12.9%
25-34	269	14.7%
35-44	238	13.0%
45-54	285	15.5%
55-64	332	18.1%
65-69	195	10.6%
70+	279	15.2%

SEG

The sample is closely matched to the UK adult population in terms of SEG. The sample has slightly more unemployed respondents.

Table 5 – SEG of respondents

	Sample size	Sample proportion
A - Higher managerial	103	5.6%
B - Intermediate managerial	400	21.8%
C1 - Supervisory or clerical	503	27.4%

C2 - Skilled manual worker	335	18.2%
D - Semi and unskilled manual worker	241	13.1%
E - Student	55	3.0%
E - Unemployed	200	10.9%

Nation

The sample contains a lower proportion of respondents in England compared to the UK population due to boosting in Wales. Scotland has a similar proportion to the UK as a whole.

Table 6 –Respondent nation

	Sample size	Sample proportion
England	1464	79.7%
Wales	181	9.9%
Scotland	192	10.5%

Region

The sample matches closely with the proportions within the UK adult population.

Table 6 –Respondent region

	Sample size	Sample proportion
North West England	190	13.0%
North East England	90	6.1%
Yorkshire and the Humber	168	11.5%
East Midlands	103	7.0%
West Midlands	132	9.0%
East of England	138	9.4%
London	228	15.6%
South East England	276	18.9%
South West England	139	9.5%

Weighing of sample

The inclusion criteria for the research as outlined above and the quotas applied to households with/without smart meters means that our sample is not an exact match to the UK adult population. There is currently no large sample published data (for example census data) relating to the demographic makeup of households with Smart Meters fitted or the relationship between home ownership/renting and the fitting of Smart Meters for us to match our sample demographics to.

With this in mind, we feel that it would be more detrimental to weight the data to a nationally representative sample since we have no accurate data to weight the sample of smart meter users to, and we believe this population to be different to a nationally representative population.

Comparative data

The final report produced by DJS Research contained references and comparative data (where applicable) to previous research carried out on behalf of Citizens Advice. The report referenced for comparative reasons is 'Early consumer experiences of smart meters'. These comparisons are for illustrative purposes only and look at general trends. Citizens Advice commissioned Accent to carry out this research, which was conducted in January and February 2016. The research included qualitative telephone/web interviews with 70 smart meter users and 70 non-users, and further qualitative depth interviews with 15 smart meter users and 15 non-users. Any comparisons between the two surveys should be treated with caution due to the vastly reduced base size in the 2016 study and the different methodologies used.

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We help people overcome their problems and campaign on big issues when their voices need to be heard.

We value diversity, champion equality, and challenge discrimination and harassment.

We're here for everyone.



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