



EMERGING EQUITY

Environmental Change Institute



**OXFORD
COMMUNITY
ACTION**

Where Communities Thrive

Project funded by:

Advancing Capacity for Climate
and Environment Social Science



ACCESS



What this leaflet is about?



Dear friends,

This is a summary of our discussions on the ways in which who we are, relates to how we are able to use energy in our lives. As a member of the OCA community, your insights were crucial to help understand this relationship. Hopefully, these insights can be shared with those who have the power to take decisions (such as the City Council) to improve our experience of using energy in a comfortable and less stressful manner.



About Project REPAIR



In February 2024, we gathered as a community in East Oxford to discuss our hardships when it comes to using energy. This was as part of Project REPAIR, which stands for Research on Energy through Participatory Insights from community Representatives. Project REPAIR was conducted along with your valuable inputs by researchers from the University of Oxford and Oxford Community Action. You would have attended at least one of the two workshops that we held to learn more about your experiences around using energy. These workshops tried to, (1) understand your experiences around using energy especially for activities like cooking, heating, travelling, cleaning, laundry, commuting, etc., and (2) collectively identify possible solutions to improve these experiences and who you think should be take action. The project was funded by the ACCESS Network, which is a research network based at the University of Exeter and University of Surrey. The Network aims to place people at the centre of thinking about the environment and climate change through its three guiding principles.





How Project REPAIR uses ACCESS Network's Guiding Principles



Their first principle is Environmental Sustainability, and our project fit that because it was interested in understanding how we were able to afford and sustainably use energy. Our project spoke to the second principle of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, as it was concerned with energy justice and how being racialised influences our ability to use energy. The final principle was Knowledge Co-production, by which they mean sharing and producing knowledge together. We co-designed the second workshop objectives together, and in the second workshop we also collectively discussed possible solutions to take forward. In order to make the most of our participatory workshops, we also collaboratively came up with ground rules for our workshops to help guide our conversations in a respectful and meaningful way.





These ground rules included:

- Staying comfortable: The workshops were a safe space, but we decided to only share what we were comfortable sharing
- Confidential stuff remained in the room. Anything that we shared outside the workshops was without people's names
- One mic: one person speaks; full attention, no interruption. We listened deeply, spoke thoughtfully
- We were committed to respecting each other's opinions. We used "I" statements to avoid conflict
- "Move up, move up": we gave each other space and time to talk, but also recognised that we need to give others in the group time to speak. In these discussions we were focusing on energy
- The personal is political. When sharing our experiences, we thought about the structures that impact our daily lives



Through these rules that we collectively decided on, you participated in two workshops from which the following findings emerged.

Finding 1: A warm space is a welcoming space

Hosting people and inviting them to your house is an important aspect of feeling like you belong in a place among people and fostering a sense of community. In the workshops, some of you observed that hosting people is closely linked to how comfortable you feel in the space you inhabit. However, given how expensive and poorly managed some houses are, you encountered challenges. Mould is caused by damp and cold spaces. This has psychological as well as physical impacts. People feel ashamed to host people in such spaces. These uncomfortable spaces also lead to health challenges such as coughs that don't go away for a long time.

"I used to love hosting people, cooking for people, having a barbecue, and things like that. But now, I feel ashamed inviting people over because we have a huge problem with the mould. My ten-year-old has a cough that takes longer to recover because of it."

Extending warmth and staying warm are related. But staying warm has a cost to it, that hinders you from inviting friends over. These challenges further show what we already know - that the energy crisis and cost of living crisis are related.

"I cannot even visit a friend. He told me yesterday, "if you are coming to my house, you have to call me as I don't have heating. I don't have money to pay for my energy."

Many of you recently immigrated here and are often from places where you enjoyed warmed climates and did not have to think much about heating. Therefore, your familiarity with heating practices here, and understanding of how the retail energy system works is different.

"If you grow up in a climate like Nigeria, you spend more to keep your house warm in England, because you are very cold very easily."

Finding 2: Cooking is a significant way in which people manage their energy use

Food and cooking food that you have grown up with and are familiar with are an important part of one's identity. Apart from using energy to stay warm, using energy for cooking was the second commonly discussed dimension of managing energy use, in the workshops.

"I cook my food, I love to do that. Anyone who knows me, knows that about me. I am on pay-as-you-go. I want to eat good food, but when I think of cooking, I think of the price. I like to eat my ethnic food, so I have to cook it. I feel restricted by how I can cook. What I have to do now is that I have to cook everything at once cook the beans, cook the soup, cook everything. And then I have to stock them in the freezer. But, after three days, I don't enjoy the food anymore, because it is not fresh.
But what can I do?"

Most of you associated with a strong culture of cooking food from home, from scratch. Beans are an important ingredient in many of your cooking practices, and they take a long time to cook. Therefore, you sometimes feel anxious about the energy running out while cooking, or having a really costly bill.

"The relationship between landlord and tenant becomes difficult while regulating gas and electric. This is because of the high cost. When I was living as a tenant, I had to cook for a week because Sunday was the day my landlord allowed me to use all the electric appliances like cooker and washing machine."



Finding 3: International students & recent immigrants in shared accommodation are very vulnerable to housing and energy hardships.

If you are either an international student or recent immigrant living in shared accommodation, then you are further under-represented in research in an already under-researched relationship between racialisation and energy use. If you identify with one of these categories, then you face additional challenges around

"You cannot challenge the landlord. They will tell you to leave the house. It is because I am Black, especially Black African, that I am treated this way. They don't mess with people from here, because they know the laws. I am on a student visa, so don't want to complain too much."

- Being less familiar about your rights and understanding of how the gas, electricity and housing systems in the UK work. Even if you are entitled to certain rights, the precarity of your visas could affect your ability to comfortably raise concerns.
- Having constrained access to, and limited control over spaces and energy appliances could affect your well-being (there is some research on how comfortable you feel depending on how much control you have over these spaces and appliances).

"Back home, I am the owner of my apartment. So, I can control everything the way I want to. But here, in shared accommodation, you feel fear. You are always told not to use the microwave, or can only use the kitchen sometimes. It restricts you."

Finding 4: Democratising solutions to tackle the energy crisis

When discussing what can be done to tackle these hardships, there was unanimous agreement on challenging the steep hike in prices. To this end, many of you recommended a collective approach by democratising the means of energy production, through solar. We will leave you with this quote from one of you, as a hopeful call to action to tackle the energy prices and comfortably use energy.

"We need to talk about how we can get our own energy, produce the electricity by ourselves. Implementation of solar energy is one option, but it is expensive. It is not accessible to an average person. Definitely not for the people who need it."



To summarise, your lived experience testimonies underscore the stress and anxiety that is endured when attempting to use energy for basic activities around staying warm and cooking. These hardships are caused by systemic failures to bring down energy costs, and need to make the energy system more welcoming to people who have been systemically disadvantaged. Your experiences of negotiating the housing and energy systems, being on precarious/ limited duration visas as students and recent immigrants bears testimony to the structural scale at which racialised disadvantages are experienced. When you were asked about the word you associate with belonging or feeling at home, "comfort" was what came up very often. Comfort is also an important dimension of wellbeing especially within the built environment. Further underscoring the importance of exploring these intersections between racialisation and energy use.

"When you feel at home, you feel accepted. You are free to do many things- going somewhere, doing what other people do. This is not our mother's land but we are equal with the people here, so we feel at home.

But when you are not feeling at home, or when you are not free, you see yourself drawing back. When you are welcomed, you feel free and have equal rights. That is what I call belonging."



What next?



We hope you find these results insightful, and we hope to continue doing more research and calling for action to address some of the challenges you are experiencing. Furthering research and fostering collective action are some ways of taking this work forward.

More specifically, we hope to share these findings with the All-Party Parliamentary Groups on fuel poverty and energy efficiency, and race and community, so that our political decision-makers are made aware of your experiences. We also hope to share these insights into community organising manifestos on housing justice in and around Oxford and Oxfordshire.



Useful tips and resources



Citizens Advice are running a Speak-Seek-Save Campaign:

- Speak to your energy supplier
- Seek advice from organisations in your community
- Save money by using energy differently

They have also shared some suggestions on how you can use energy differently. We recognise that some of these might not be entirely relevant for your situation, but consider this as general advice.



- Turn down your thermostat by 1°C and save around £105 a year on energy bills. But to keep comfortable and stay safe they recommend staying above 18°C.
- Switch your heating off when leaving the house for a few hours. It is cheaper to reheat your home than keep your heating on low when you're out, unless you own a heat pump
- Fit draught-proofing strips to your windows and doors and save around £45 a year. This can be a quick DIY job. Keeping extra heat in your home will leave you feeling warmer and more comfortable
- Get a hot water cylinder jacket and save roughly £50 a year on energy bills. Jackets are easy to fit, typically cost under £30, and you'll also spend less on a hot shower or bath in the future
- Keep furniture away from radiators and heaters to feel warmer at home. Don't overwork your system by blocking your source of heat and remember to remove radiator covers to get more value for money
- Remember to turn lights off when you're not using them - even if it's just off for a few seconds. This could save around £25 a year. When it's time to replace the bulb, consider going for an LED bulb - these reach full brightness right away and cost a lot less to run than older bulbs
- You could save around £14 a year by using your washing machine on a 30-degree cycle instead of higher temperatures. Ditch the dryer to save even more money - dry your clothes on racks inside or outside in warmer weather to save up to £60 a year
- Heat can escape through your chimney. Installing a chimney draught excluder could save you around £65 a year

There are grants available to help you pay off your energy debt.

- The British Gas Energy Trust Grant
- Local energy grant from your local council

Get in touch with Citizens Advice to understand the eligibility and additional details to apply for these grants.

You can also get debt advice through their helpline 0800 240 4420 to understand how to manage your debts. You can speak to your supplier to agree to a payment plan with them (that is, you will pay a fixed amount towards the debt you owe, over a fixed period of time. This means, you will pay what you can afford). If you cannot afford the payment plan, speak to your supplier again to try and negotiate a better deal with them.

