Case study: Energy Data Cooperative

Data done for people, not to them

As energy users we create a wealth of data often without realising it. If we have a smart meter, much of this data is collected by our energy providers to enable them to understand demand and energy usage patterns. The benefits they get from this insight aren't always passed back to the consumer.

Open Data Manchester has been developing a data cooperative model for small energy cooperatives in partnership with Manchester-based Carbon Coop and supported through the Open Data Institute's Data Infrastructure Stimulus Fund.

The aim of the project was to explore if a cooperative model of data custodianship could allow members' energy data to be collected, used and shared more effectively both within and outside the cooperative, returning value to the individual member, the cooperative and wider society.

We brought together our community and experts to explore these issues in a series of workshops, starting with an introduction to data, before moving on to designing and managing a data co-operative. This meant we could encourage people with varying levels of data expertise to come along and contribute.

Over the course of the project we ran 6 workshops, with a total of 10 participants from across the UK. The workshops were made up of a mixture of private and academic sector, along with members from the Carbon Coop itself.

On completion of the project, we published a report on what we learned. We then ran an event 'How to Build a Data Cooperative', where we presented our findings. We invited speakers Astha Kapoor, co-founder of the Aapthi Institute, and Hays Witt, CEO of Drivers Seat Cooperative, along with Anouk Ruhaak, Mozilla Fellow, who chaired the discussion.

The sold-out event took place online, and was attended by people from all over the world, including the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, France, Sweden, Portugal, Turkey, South Africa, India, USA, Canada and Bolivia. One attendee described it as "very illuminating on a fairly novel concept."

From our research and discussion, we identified some outstanding questions about how to create data cooperatives that people would trust – on things like the transparency and legibility of the system, particularly any automation involved, and of course, the time and financial costs of setting up and sustaining such a structure.

The issue of trust versus scale is one that cannot be ignored for data cooperatives. It presents an interesting opportunity for further research. We have therefore set up a Data Cooperative Working Group, including practitioners from across the glob