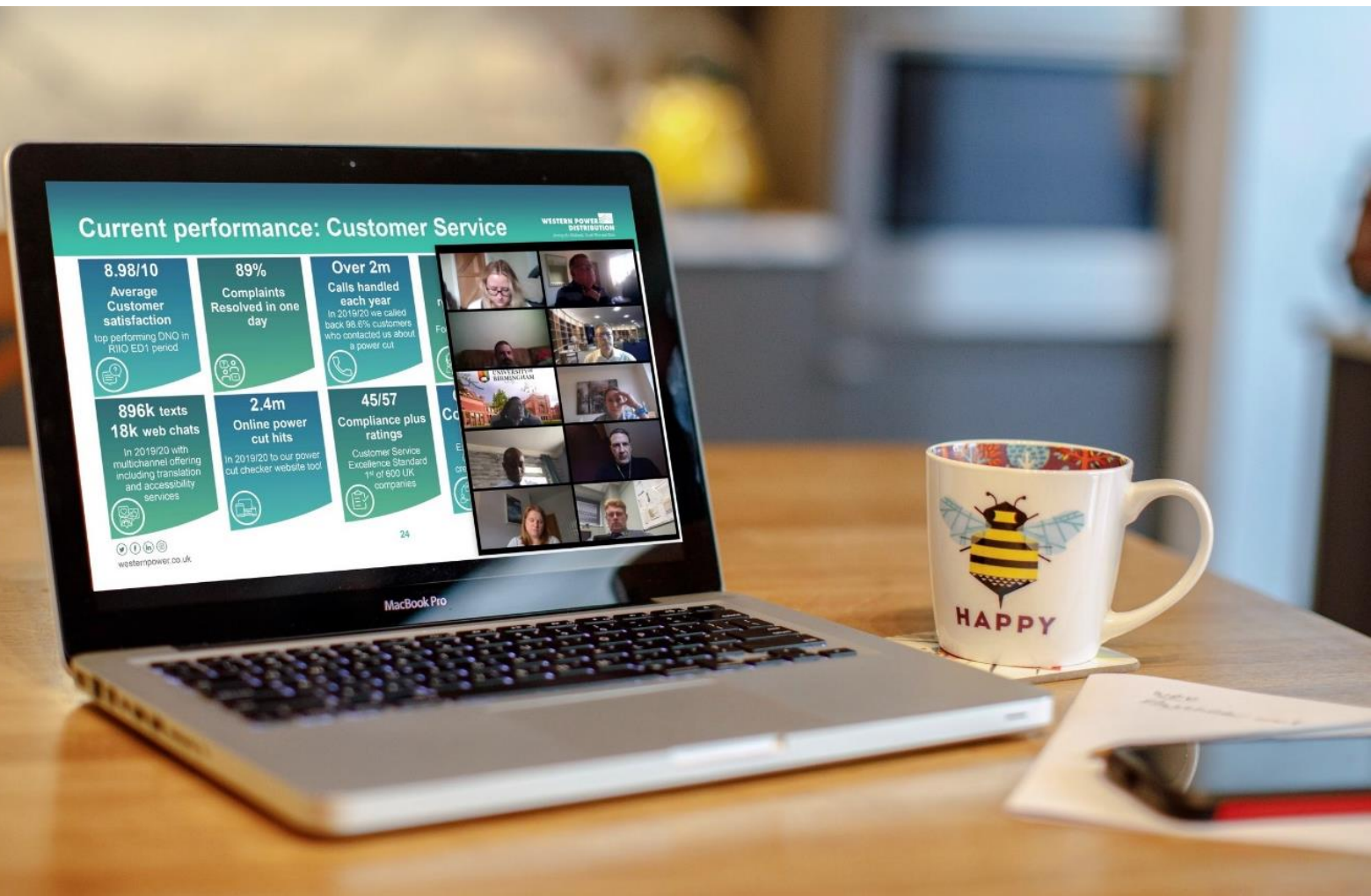


# WPD Customer Panel Spotlight Report 2020/21

An independent report written by the Customer Panel



## Introduction

The Customer Panel (The Panel), previously called the Customer Collaboration Panel, is a group of knowledgeable and interested individuals who meet quarterly to support Western Power Distribution (WPD). In previous years these meetings have taken place in one of WPD's local depots.

The Panel has been in place for 13 years and currently has a pool of approximately 30 permanent, expert members. During the year different panel members have attended each meeting, but all members receive the relevant slide pack(s) and have been encouraged to comment or provide ideas and feedback remotely.

For 2020/21 the Covid-19 pandemic, which will be referred to throughout this report, meant that face-to-face meetings could not take place and a switch to remote meetings was required. This proved to be challenging for some, but a benefit to others. We found members who would not have previously been able to attend regularly due to travelling distances were now able to take part. However, we also experienced the difficulties with remote working that many boards and businesses had to contend with.

## Objectives

Our objectives as a Panel were reviewed at the beginning of the year and remain, to:

- Act as an advocate for consumers.
- Provide expert advice on, but not limited to, WPD's initiatives, customer service and operations.
- Provide feedback, analysis and opinion on WPD's initiatives.
- Highlight and advise WPD on key issues of current or emerging consumer concern to help scope and shape WPD's approach.
- Act as a "sounding board" to allow WPD to test innovation and ideas for initiatives.
- Provide an environment where new ideas supporting WPD's development can be created, shared and evolved.
- Support and facilitate partnerships between WPD and consumer or specialist interest groups.

The Panel holds closed sessions for members preceding the main meeting with WPD. This facilitates an open discussion on any issues that need to be highlighted and allows discussion on how challenges or questions can best be presented. The closed session allows members to reflect on the agenda and ensures each member is able to raise new topics for further discussion and ask questions freely.

## Executive Summary

The past year proved to be very challenging for both the business and the communities that WPD serves and highlighted the benefit of The Panel in its support for WPD during this turbulent time.

In normal years, The Panel would continue to focus on the strategic priorities previously agreed with stakeholders, this year much of the focus inevitably moved to supporting those

working and living through the pandemic. However, this doesn't mean we didn't continue to scrutinise, challenge and provide advice to WPD as it worked towards its newest business plan.

Working closely with the Customer Engagement Group (CEG) enabled a seamless process whereby a challenge could be raised by the CEG, specific issues could be discussed with The Panel and ideas for solutions or improvements could be suggested and a way forward could be agreed. Alongside this more strategic focus, The Panel provided additional support to WPD including

- Providing feedback on WPD's Business Plan for RIIO-ED2, including reviewing previous stakeholder insight and refining proposed commitments in detail
- Devising application criteria and extensive assessment of applications allowing the allocation of £1m to support communities in need due to the pandemic
- The creation of a number of sub-groups to sound out and test projects, communications and new innovative ideas, and
- The introduction of the new Trello board to enhance Panel interaction with each other and WPD.

## 20/21 a year in focus

As soon as the year started and just ten days after the first UK-wide lockdown, WPD announced a new fund to support communities across the region that were being impacted by Covid-19. The Panel was asked for volunteers to support the distribution of this funding and set up a small subgroup to take this forward. The subgroup was responsible for setting the criteria, with the whole panel helping to publicise the availability of grants. As soon as applications began to come in the subgroup stepped up to undertake rigorous assessments of them against the criteria.

The first round invited applications from charities, local hospitals, community groups, parish councils and local authorities for grants of up to £10,000. The scheme received some 586 applications and was fully subscribed, with over 300 organisations across WPD's geographical footprint receiving funding, which totalled £500,000. Between them these organisations helped to deliver vital support and care to more than 400,000 people at the height of the lockdown.

A truly diverse range of groups benefited from the funding, including established charities like foodbanks, hospitals, The Salvation Army, AGE UK and several hospices. However, we were also delighted to see that, in addition to those established organisations, a large number of community groups that formed specially to help their local communities through the pandemic also benefitted including groups that delivered food parcels, collected prescriptions or offered online virtual support to those isolating.

A second round of funding was then announced making available a further £250,000. That round of funding invited each of the 180 constituency MPs in the WPD regions to nominate charities and local groups that could benefit from a grant of up to £1,500. Again, The Panel administered grants to the nominated community groups, charities, faith groups and businesses that changed focus to help people during the pandemic.

A third and final £250,000 was made available when the Festive Fund was launched in November 2020. 408 applications were assessed and funding allocated to support initiatives specifically offering food and clothing parcels, hot meals, gifts and support to those who were most vulnerable in the winter period. Chief Executive Phil Swift said

*“I am proud that we were able to step up and provide support at grassroots level. Most of our employees live in the communities they serve so it was important that we didn’t just write large cheques to one or two charities and walk away.*

*Instead we reached out – and it has been heart-warming and humbling to read the applications we received from people who stepped up for their communities.”*



*Left: an infographic used on WPD’s social media to promote the excellent final outcome of the In This Together – Community Matters fund*

Hot on the heels of the *In This Together – Community Matters* funding, WPD announced a new round of its Innovation funding with a specific focus on Energy Affordability. Although not a totally new initiative, The Panel was once again asked to be involved and welcomed the chance to feed into the criteria, process and distribution. Another subgroup was formed and a number of brainstorming sessions held.

Funding was designed to support not-for-profit organisations in delivering innovative affordable warmth or Priority Services Register services, though this time adapting to the Covid-19 pandemic and developing new ways of working to support vulnerable customers effectively while maintaining safe social distancing.

Groups were asked to apply for up to £20,000 to

- Identify new registrants for the Priority Services Register and to offer support to households already registered.
- Help those eligible for the Priority Services Register to lower and manage their bills.
- Provide advice and support to enable vulnerable households to carry out home energy efficiency improvements.
- Target home energy advice and support to householders in higher-deprivation neighbourhoods and in areas not connected to the gas network, potentially using WPD's vulnerability App.
- Work with healthcare providers to raise awareness of the links between cold, damp homes and poor physical and mental health.

Following six successful applications a feedback session was held to provide learning to WPD which can feed into any future rounds. The Panel was particularly helpful in assessing the applications for this funding and making suggestions as to how applications could be improved for future bids. Richard Allcock, WPD's Stakeholder Engagement Manager, said

*"The Panel allowed WPD to bounce ideas around and get a strong consensus on what to take forward. Their expertise and prior knowledge of WPD and similar projects meant they knew what to ask partners for and what more information we needed. That ensured we got much stronger applications".*

Whilst much of the year may seem to have been spent helping WPD to get funding out of the door to those really suffering, The Panel also continued with its other supporting, advising and challenging role. Our work included providing substantive input into both the Customer Service and Customer Vulnerability strategies. We assessed feedback from stakeholders at a Social Obligations workshop and endorsed WPD's proposed Business Plan outputs. We also commented on proposed actions following the annual Local Network Investment workshops.

A particular highlight this year, outside of the Coronavirus linked activities, was the support and guidance we provided to WPD in the formulation of the new Social Contract. The Social Contract is designed to articulate the commitments that WPD makes to its stakeholders. It provides a way to measure these commitments and to hold WPD to account in achieving them.

Whilst discussed at whole Panel meetings, detailed development was also taken forward by a subgroup from The Panel. Our comprehensive contribution has helped to

- Ensure that the social contract is embedded (built-in not bolt-on) across WPD
- Illustrate the weighting of priorities as well as interaction between different focus areas
- Situate the social contract in the wider global context (i.e. United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, Covid-19)
- Ensure it is industry leading, setting an example for others with a replicable framework
- Identify opportunities to maximise social value (for example, through further collaboration).

With the recent launch of the Social Contract, The Panel is now looking forward to continuing to work with WPD on improvements. It's certainly an area where our contribution can make a real difference to consumers.

Another small but notable intervention involved The Panel providing advice after stakeholders suggested new communication ideas for customers on the PSR to retain useful information.

As part of these communications, WPD originally planned to design and print two stickers, one to advertise the PSR and one detailing WPD emergency contact numbers. The latter could be kept safe perhaps by attaching to medical equipment, ensuring customers would know who to contact in the event of a power cut.



The Panel felt the first sticker was unnecessary as a freepost leaflet was available for this purpose and once a customer had registered for the PSR they would no longer require the sticker. Members had suggestions for the design and content of all the materials. WPD took our critique well and, in this case, progressed with only one sticker, with a design heavily influenced by our comments. These have now been printed and distributed and have been well received by agencies signing customers up to the register.

At various points during the year The Panel heard from WPD on how their customer engagement and business plans were coming together. Some members also attended RIIO stakeholder events to see how engagement was progressing and fed back at Panel meetings. Overall, and despite the restrictions of the last year, members saw good progress being made.

The Panel also remained conscious and interested in WPD's 'business as usual' operations outside RIIO2 planning. To this end we've been keen to hear more about topics such as network and cyber resilience, provision for vulnerable customers and community energy groups, amongst other topics. We've also been keen to keep watch on how WPD was positioned against their peers in the general performance measures and have sought KPIs in this area on a regular basis.

## For the Future

As mentioned above, The Panel is made up of interested and knowledgeable individuals from many varied organisations, many of whom have direct contact with customers on a daily basis; some of whom have operational experience and others with a more strategic focus. This enables us to act as an informed, and sometimes opinionated, 'critical friend' to WPD. However, we know that we need to keep our knowledge and experience relevant to the changing needs of a DSO. We would welcome interest from sectors not currently covered by The Panel. Particularly we'd welcome representatives with experience in Net Zero, Electric Vehicles and the leisure sector.

The following sectors are currently represented:

- MPs and Government
- Storage providers
- Energy aggregators
- Connections
- Community Energy (CE) groups
- Network security
- Emergency resilience
- Health
- Utilities/energy industry
- Parish Council/Local Authority/LEP
- Education/academics
- Distributed Generation
- Major Energy Users
- Innovation
- Business customers
- Fuel poverty
- Environment
- Vulnerable/hard-to-reach
- Customer service/consumer interest
- Domestic customers

We've also agreed some future changes to the structure of our meetings. Previously we held the full panel meeting in the morning and then a selection of topic specific 'surgeries' (always including Social Obligations) in the afternoon. With the pandemic, and awareness that a whole day of Zoom may not get the best out of participants, we decided to hold the surgeries on a different day. This has the added benefit of being able to invite external support from representatives who may not be able to make the full commitment required for membership of The Panel, but none the less have an awful lot to contribute.

Panel surgeries enable attendees to hear early details of WPDs plans, feed in ideas for improvements or different ways of achieving results and work more collaboratively with WPD. Future surgeries are already planned on topics such as WPD's plans for Net Zero by 2028, Electric Vehicles (including generation, transmission, V2G, grid constraints), a Community Energy Strategy update, vulnerability and the Priority Services Register and much more. The Panel would be delighted to hear from you if you would like to contribute.

*"The Customer Panel is an enduring, core element of our stakeholder engagement programme and valued greatly by all at WPD. Having The Panel available to advise, evaluate and co-create solutions with us drives better value for our customers and the communities we serve." - Richard Allcock, Stakeholder Engagement Manager*

For the 21/22 year the panel will expect to focus very much on implementation of the agreed business plan, moves to Net Zero and ensuring that vulnerable customers are not left behind in the move to a smarter future. We will also look forward to hearing about potential changes brought about by the new ownership of WPD.

**Report compiled by Gabby Mallet (Chair – WPD Customer Panel) with support and endorsement from The Panel.**