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Business Plan Workshop: customer service; consumer vulnerability; and Social Contract

15 September 2021

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Serving the Midlands, South West and Wales

Contents

Introduction

On 15 September 2021, Western Power Distribution (WPD) hosted a virtual workshop to seek feedback from stakeholders on its RIIO-ED2 Business Plan, focusing on the following topics: customer service; customer vulnerability; and the Social Contract.

The workshop was hosted online, using Zoom. Each session consisted of a short presentation given by WPD representatives, followed by facilitated discussions in virtual breakout rooms. In addition, stakeholders were asked to vote in an online poll using Slido on a number of topics. Due to rounding to the closest whole number, figures may not always add up to 100%.

WPD instructed EQ Communications, a specialist stakeholder engagement consultancy, to independently facilitate the workshop and to take notes of the comments made by stakeholders. Every effort has been made to faithfully record the feedback given. In order to encourage candour and open debate, comments have not been ascribed to individuals. Instead, notes have been made of the type of organisation each stakeholder represents.

The full presentation can be found here.

Methodology

Maximising participation

WPD's database contains the details of more than 10,000 stakeholders, all of whom were invited to take part in the workshop series. The database is refreshed annually to update existing contact details and add information on stakeholders who have registered via the website or worked with members of the WPD team over the last 12 months. In addition, politicians' contact details are updated following any local or national elections. To ensure that WPD remains on top of emerging sector-specific issues, additional research is undertaken ahead of topic-specific engagement to ensure that the database contains comprehensive, up-to-date information for certain stakeholder categories, especially as new roles or stakeholder groups emerge.

The stakeholders on the WPD database were sent several email invitations for the consultation events to ensure that they were given the opportunity to participate. The first invitation was sent on 18 August 2021 to give stakeholders at least four weeks' notice. In addition to the email invitations, pre-identified stakeholders also received telephone calls with the aim of ensuring a mix of different stakeholder groups across the workshops. As standard practice, ahead of any workshops, all stakeholders who have registered are reminded about the event via telephone and email with a view to maximising participation.

Despite these measures, compared with previous stakeholder workshops held to inform the development of the Business Plan in 2020 and 2021, registration numbers and subsequent turnout rates at the events were relatively low. Stakeholders who registered but did not attend were contacted after the workshops with a view to identifying the reasons for the low turnout. Of the 18 stakeholders who responded, almost three quarters (72%) cited diary clash, personal issue or workload as the reason for not attending on the day. Only one stakeholder cited consultation fatigue. When asked whether they felt they had been adequately consulted on WPD's Business Plan, despite not attending on the day almost three quarters (72%) confirmed they had been adequately consulted with only one stakeholder feeling they had not.

Providing accessible information

There were four short presentations, each followed by breakout sessions in smaller groups to enable stakeholders to provide verbal feedback. Relevant slides from the presentation were shared in the breakout rooms to ensure that stakeholders had sufficient information in front of them to participate. If stakeholders did not answer a question, the facilitators asked them to confirm whether their silence indicated tacit approval or whether they felt unable to respond.

Each breakout session was followed by electronic voting, with online voting software used to gather quantitative feedback on each topic. Stakeholders were given the option of 'don't know / can't say' when voting and asked not to answer if they felt that they did not have enough information or the necessary level of expertise to take a view. The number of voters who responded 'don't know / can't say' has been set out under each voting question in this report.

Stakeholders were emailed a copy of the RIIO-ED2 Business Plan ahead of the workshop to provide them with additional background information for the event.
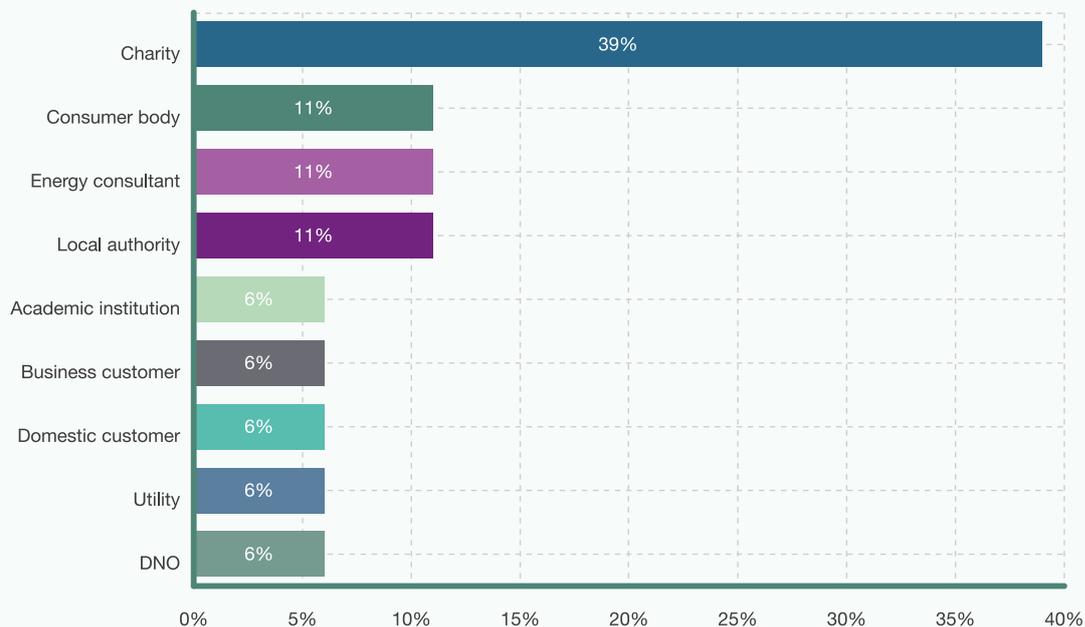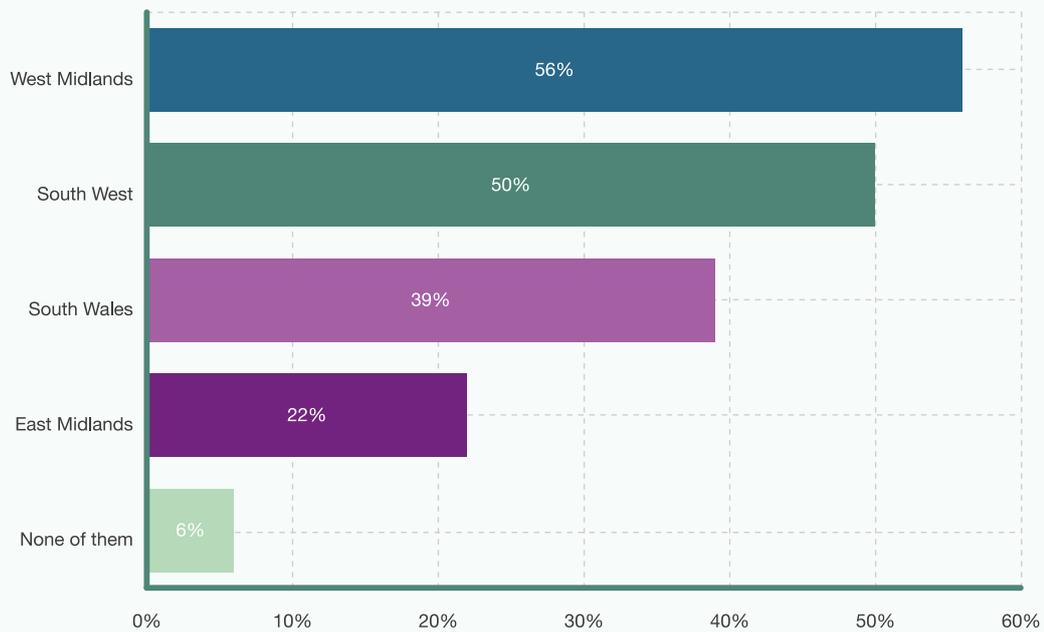
Executive summary

Participants

- A total of 21 stakeholders participated in the workshop, representing 18 organisations.

- The largest proportion of delegates (39%) represented the charity sector. Stakeholders represented a wide range of sectors, including energy, business, academia and consumer bodies.

- Over half of attendees (56%) identified the West Midlands as the region that was relevant to them, while the South West, South Wales and the East Midlands were relevant for 50%, 39% and 22% of delegates, respectively. Stakeholders were able to select multiple regions, so the figures add up to greater than 100%.

- 67% of attendees who filled out a feedback form told us that they found the workshop to be 'very interesting', with the other 33% opting for 'interesting'.

What type of stakeholder are you?

Stakeholder type	Percentage
Charity	39%
Consumer body	11%
Energy consultant	11%
Local authority	11%
Academic institution	6%
Business customer	6%
Domestic customer	6%
Utility	6%
DNO	6%

Which WPD region is relevant to you?

Workshop One: WPD's first Business Plan submission to Ofgem

The event began with an introduction from Mark Shaw, RIIO-ED2 Business Plan Manager. Mark summarised the key headlines in the Business Plan and explained WPD's business planning process to date. He explained the overall bill impact for customers and why bills vary regionally between different licence areas. Stakeholders were presented with a minimum bill increase/decrease (base case) and a more realistic bill increase/decrease (best view) for each WPD region.

- Most stakeholders reported that their role was related in some way to vulnerability or fuel poverty, whether through vulnerability modelling or working directly with vulnerable customers. Attendees were keen to learn more about WPD's plans in these areas with a view to informing their own work going forward.

- WPD's Business Plan received widespread approval, with 94% indicating that they agree or strongly agree that it is acceptable.

- Although there was general concern about the implications of a bill increase for fuel-poor and vulnerable customers, stakeholders noted that WPD could take steps to mitigate the impact on these groups by, for example, ensuring the bill increase is coupled with an increase in the provision of support to vulnerable customers.

- Although stakeholders seemed to recognise the need for regional variation in bills, rating their own understanding of this at 4 out of 5 on average, a sizeable minority felt that the disparity was unfair, with 19% of stakeholders disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that it was acceptable.

Workshop Two: Customer service

Chris Griffiths, Contact Centre Manager, introduced stakeholders to some of the company's core customer service commitments. He explained that WPD was particularly interested in gathering stakeholder feedback on its proposed commitments to respond to queries submitted via social media and webchat within five minutes and one minute, respectively, and to achieve an average customer satisfaction score of at least 90% across all key services areas, with separate reporting for emerging technology customers.

- 77% strongly agreed that WPD's social media commitment is acceptable, although 15% strongly disagreed with this statement. Only one stakeholder responded 'don't know / can't say'.

- Although stakeholders were broadly supportive of WPD's social media commitment, the company was advised against focusing on response time to the detriment of quality of service, and stakeholders highlighted the fact that vulnerable customers may be less likely to use social media.

- Most stakeholders (69%) felt that WPD's customer satisfaction commitment shows the right level of ambition, although some (31%) felt that the company should be more ambitious.

Workshop Three: Customer vulnerability

Richard Allcock, Stakeholder Engagement Manager, gave an overview of WPD's core commitments under Customer Vulnerability, showing how they had been drafted and developed with stakeholders. He then asked for further feedback and guidance from delegates on two refined commitments: to increase registrations on the Priority Services Register (PSR) to 75% of eligible customers, and to add tailored resilience plans to the Power Cut Reporter App; and on two new commitments: to appoint vulnerability champions at WPD depots, and to implement a criteria for vulnerability considerations when planning new schemes across the business.

- A majority of stakeholders agreed with the refinement to the PSR commitment, and 80% either agreed or strongly agreed with WPD's proposal in the electronic voting.

- Delegates were more split over the use of the app to add tailored resilience plans: some advocated the agentic drive for self-sufficiency in the commitment, but others questioned whether vulnerable customers would take up this kind of technology, and this debate was reflected in the voting, where 28% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 43% strongly agreed or agreed.

- Stakeholders widely approved of the commitment to train vulnerability champions at depots, 87% signalling their agreement with this initiative.

- The commitment to implement a criteria for vulnerability considerations received similar levels of support, with 87% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the proposal.

Workshop Four: Social Contract

Eleanor Patey, Social Obligations Manager, presented the final session of the day. She explained that WPD were the first DNO to publish a Social Contract, a standalone, enduring document that declares the company's purpose: to deliver exceptional service to customers and support the environmental and social wellbeing of its communities. She outlined the Social Contract's key areas: for WPD to be an Environmental Steward, for WPD to Enrich Communities, and for WPD to be an Employer of Choice; and asked for feedback on whether these were the right areas of focus. Finally, she sought feedback on a refined commitment: to ensure employee volunteering initiatives drive good outcomes for customers.

- Stakeholders were in agreement that WPD had identified the right focus areas for the Social Contract, and this was borne out in the electronic voting, where 92% indicated approval.

- The proposed refinement to WPD's commitment regarding staff volunteering days, to ensure the work undertaken is of clear benefit to customers, received overwhelming support, with 100% voting their approval, minus one stakeholder who did not feel qualified to answer.

- Transparency and reporting on initiatives were seen to be central to keeping stakeholders informed of the work being done under Social Contract, with promotion on WPD's website and social media advocated as a way to signpost projects and funding for communities and interested partners.

Workshop One
Introduction and WPD's new proposed vulnerability commitments

Mark Shaw, RIIO-ED2 Business Plan Manager, summarised the Business Plan publication process and outlined the plan's key points, including WPD's commitments and the plan's impact on the customer bill, which will vary by region. Stakeholders were presented with a minimum bill increase/decrease (base case) and a more realistic bill increase/decrease (best view) for each WPD region.

Summary

Reason for attending

Stakeholders from a range of backgrounds indicated that addressing fuel poverty or vulnerability is a key part of their work. Some specialised in vulnerability modelling or energy studies, while others were involved in running schemes for fuel-poor customers or worked directly with customers in vulnerable situations. Many delegates indicated that they attended the workshop with a view to learning more about WPD's strategies and commitments in relation to vulnerability and fuel poverty, and some hoped that the workshop content would inform their work going forward.

WPD's Business plan

On the whole, stakeholders responded positively to WPD's Business Plan. During the electronic voting, no stakeholders indicated that they found the plan to be unacceptable, and over a third (38%) expressed strong agreement that the plan is acceptable. Only one stakeholder responded 'don't know / can't say'. In particular, stakeholders backed the proposal to increase the number of fuel-poor customers supported between RIIO-ED1 and RIIO-ED2. The focus on smart energy was also seen as a step in the right direction, as this is a growing area of interest for customers.

Impact on customer bills

A number of stakeholders expressed reservations over the proposed rise in bills, noting that "every penny counts for vulnerable people". It was felt that increases in bills are troubling given that other household expenses are also set to rise. Moreover, some questioned whether it was fair for fuel-poor customers to face higher bills, given that they are less likely to install and benefit from the low-carbon technologies that have contributed to the need for a bill increase. However, several suggestions were made as to how WPD could mitigate the rise in bills, including by tying the bill increase to improvements in the support available for vulnerable customers, and by communicating its energy efficiency assistance measures more effectively.

On the whole, stakeholders seemed to have a good understanding of the regional variation in bills. When they were asked to rate their understanding of the variation on a scale from 1 to 5, an average vote of 4 out of 5 was returned, although over a quarter (28%) rated their understanding at 2 or 3 out of 5. Some acknowledged that regional variances led to differences in the cost of running the network, and that higher bills would help to meet the cost of the low-carbon transition. However, it was widely felt that the regional disparity was inequitable; stakeholders questioned whether areas with high take-up of renewable schemes should be penalised with higher bills. Similarly, the fact that rural and lower-income areas may face higher bills was seen as unfair, with the price difference described by one stakeholder as "a shocking gap". These views were reflected in the electronic voting, where 19% disagreed or strongly disagreed that the regional variation was acceptable.
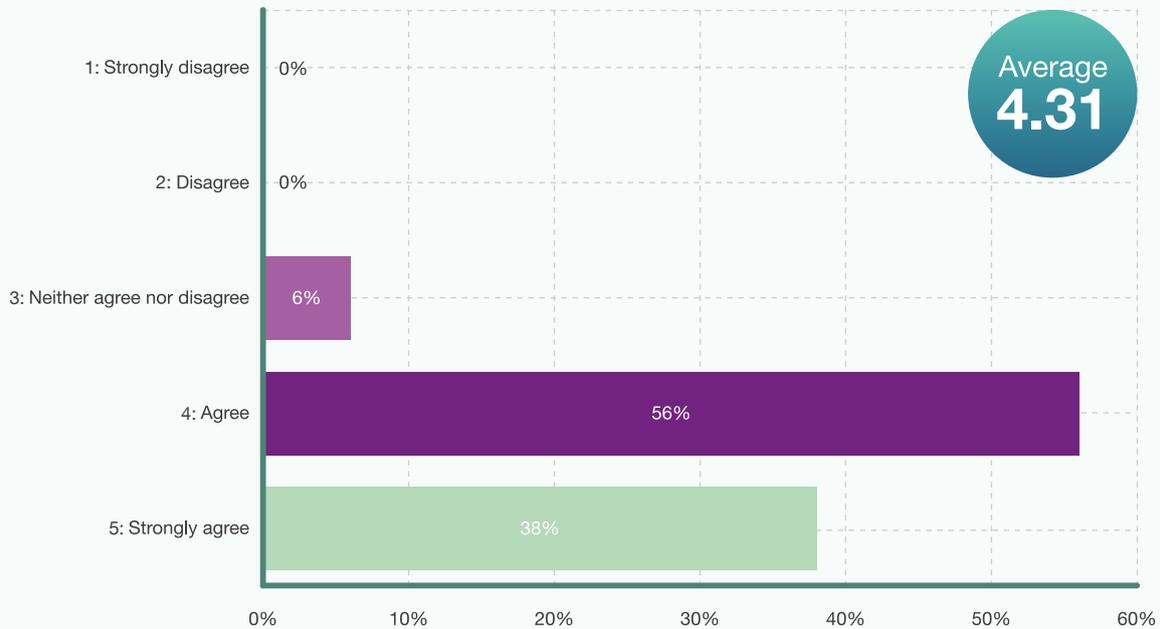
Verbatim comments and voting

1. What has brought you here today?

- "I want to ensure that the voices of the fuel poor are heard and to learn more about the Social Contract."
Vulnerable customer representative

- "My focus is to look at all our clients, including WPD, to understand your commitments regarding vulnerable customers. We can then look to support with this going forward." **Connections provider**

- "We run schemes with fuel-poor customers." **Local authority**

- "I look after the power of the South West, working with our partners in WPD, and I've come along to find out about the vulnerability strategy and what targets and commitments are coming up."
Environmental group

- "I'm the project manager in the living lab, where we carry out energy studies, so I'm interested from that point of view, but also for my colleagues who are interested in vulnerable customers."
Academic institution

- "We're a fellow DNO so my involvement in terms of contributions to the business plan is a big part of my role, so I'm here to see what WPD are proposing." **Utility**

- "I'm an engineering project manager, and we deal with a range of different DNOs across the country, so I'm here to sit in and find out about the things that WPD have got planned." **Connections provider**

- "We're a charity in South Wales and we work to deal with fuel-poverty-related issues."
Vulnerable customer representative

- "I have experience with dealing with vulnerable customers in housing developments. That's my area of interest." **Energy consultant**

- "We have an awful lot of people coming through with issues around fuel poverty and debt. Energy is increasingly becoming a major concern for the vulnerable." **Vulnerable customer representative**

- "We have helped to map vulnerability on your patch and have given you data to support your fuel poverty initiatives." **Environmental group**

- "I'm a member of the CEG and I'm here to listen to developments to ensure that WPD is fulfilling customer needs." **Consumer body**

- "I work as a vulnerability modelling analyst at my company, so I'm listening in today to take away insights for my work." **Business customer**

- "I'm an energy and climate change officer, so I make a large number of visits to homes to provide assistance to the fuel poor and see what other services we can provide to support them."
Major connections customer

2. What are your overall views on the acceptability of WPD's Business Plan?

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
"Overall, WPD's Business Plan is acceptable to me."

Average
4.31

1: Strongly disagree	0%
2: Disagree	0%
3: Neither agree nor disagree	6%
4: Agree	56%
5: Strongly agree	38%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60%

Don't know / can't say: 1/17

- "The first impression is obviously very good. 113,000 fuel-poor customers supported looks good, but I wonder where the number comes from." **Vulnerable customer representative**

- "It's really good to see the increase in the fuel-poor customers supported and the savings, so that's really positive. I'm pleased to see the smart price plan increase over two years. We've seen a lot of questions about smart energy coming up, so there is interest in that from customers and it's good to see that introduced moving forwards." **Environmental group**

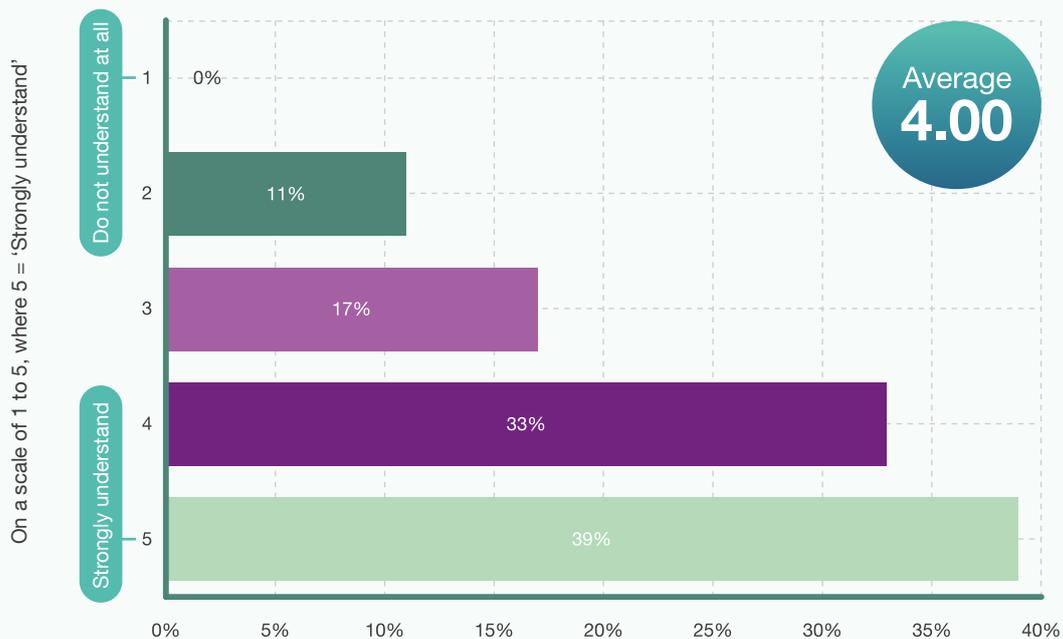## 3. What are your views on the bill impacts of WPD's proposals?

- "If there's any way of mitigating for that with some targeted support for those in fuel poverty that can help them..." **Environmental group**

- "I don't like the increases at all, as every penny counts for vulnerable people, particularly with the UC being decreased and NICs going up for working people from next year. People are literally choosing between heating and eating." **Vulnerable customer representative**

- "However, I think that if you can prove that there will be improved support for vulnerable customers, bill increases could be seen as more palatable. Maybe you could tally any increases with the number of vulnerable customers that are being reached?" **Consumer body**

- "This is just one bill that will be rising for vulnerable people, but I don't know how to solve this wider societal problem." **Energy consultant**

- "Energy bills are quite an issue for our tenants, particularly around storage heaters, which are quite costly and inefficient. WPD should communicate their energy efficiency assistance measures better." **Major connections customer**

- "This is really insightful. I imagine it comes from the likely uptake of LCTs. Representing fuel-poor customers, I wonder how the calculations have been formed in different areas. The ability of certain households to take up LCTs can depend on income and status. Some people on low incomes are not in control of their supply." **Vulnerable customer representative**

- "Although an increase of £2 is pretty small, it does add up, so that's my only concern, that it's the customers in fuel poverty that will be hardest hit. A lot of customers we support are really struggling." **Environmental group**
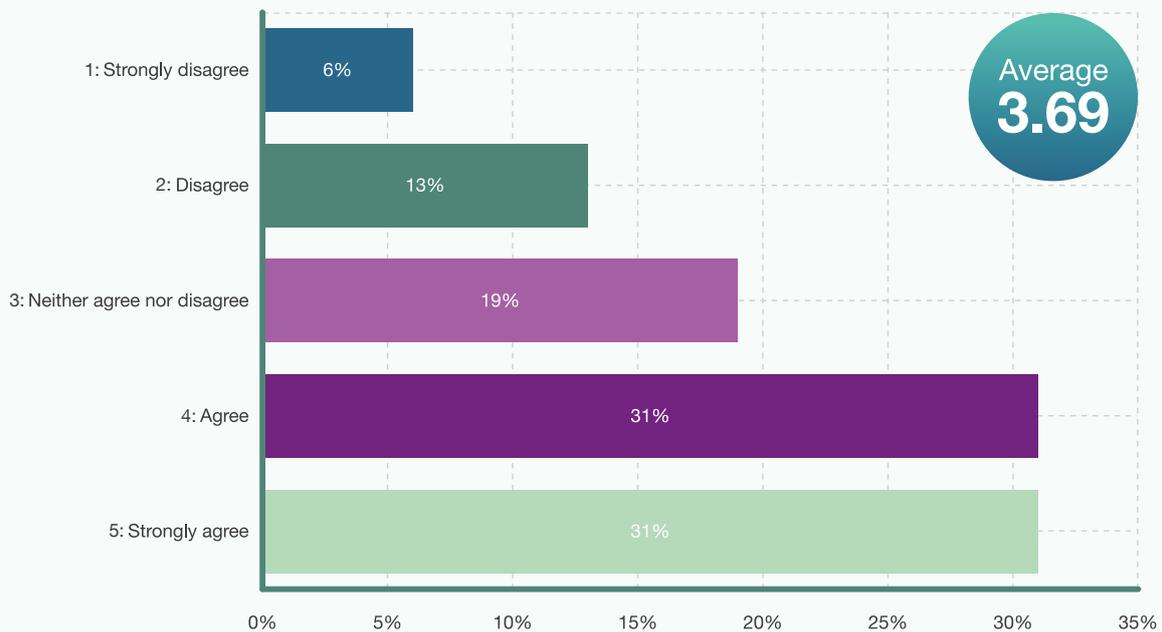
3. What are your views on the bill impacts of WPD's proposals?

To what extent do you understand the regional variance in customer bills?

Average
4.00

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 = 'Strongly understand'

Do not understand at all

Strongly understand

1 — 0%
2 — 11%
3 — 17%
4 — 33%
5 — 39%

0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40%

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
"The regional variance in customer bills is acceptable to me."

Average
3.69

Response	Percentage
1: Strongly disagree	6%
2: Disagree	13%
3: Neither agree nor disagree	19%
4: Agree	31%
5: Strongly agree	31%

Don't know / can't say: 1/17

- "Even though I understand the rationale for raising the bill costs as part of delivering the Business Plan, it was a shame to see the South West and South Wales having higher bills, due to the lower income levels there compared to the Midlands." **Vulnerable customer representative**

- "The South West and South Wales do normally take greater advantage of opportunities to set up renewable schemes, so the bill levels set out in the Business Plan are disappointing, even if the transmission costs will be greater there. There needs to be more of a conversation around this." **Vulnerable customer representative**

- "In the West Midlands we're going down, so I guess there's no complaints there! Any increase, however small, means that things are adding up, but then any change needs to be funded somehow, what with the low-carbon transition." **Community energy group**

- "You can see that the ruralness of the network is influencing the charges. Is this fair? They were seen as the ones that would be getting the electrification of heat first, and they're going to bear the brunt of that investment." **Academic institution**

- "If you look at the difference between the South West and the East Midlands, it's a shocking gap. The difference is a huge amount for a vulnerable person." **Vulnerable customer representative**

- "One problem in South Wales is that it's sparsely populated and its infrastructure is older, so it costs more to run the network. I don't see it as being possible to socialise it across the four licence areas due to the differences between them." **Community energy group**

Workshop Two
Customer service

Chris Griffiths, Contact Centre Manager, outlined some of the company's core customer service commitments. The breakout discussion centred on WPD's proposed commitment regarding its response time to customer queries submitted via social media and webchat, and its proposed customer satisfaction target for key services areas.

Summary

Social media

Stakeholders welcomed WPD's commitment to achieve an average response time of less than five minutes for social media enquiries and less than one minute for webchat enquiries. Over three quarters of voters (77%) strongly agreed that the company's commitment to social media response times was acceptable; however, at the other end of the scale, 15% strongly disagreed with this proposal. Although there were plenty of supportive comments, particularly as a prompt response is important to customers during power cuts, WPD was advised not to neglect telephone and face-to-face communication, especially since many customers in vulnerable situations prefer not to use social media or do not have internet access. Moreover, some felt that social media communication was less well suited to addressing complex problems involving customers on the Priority Services Register. Stakeholders felt that the focus on webchat was merited, as customers are able to carry out other tasks while waiting for a response.

Although a number of stakeholders were keen to stress that they approve of the proposed social media commitment, there were suggestions for improving the company's offering in this area. WPD was advised to consider the quality of customer interactions rather than focusing exclusively on the speed of its response. In addition, the company was advised to avoid using its social media commitment as a box-ticking exercise. One stakeholder suggested creating a similar time-based target for responding to customers who contact the company via telephone.

Customer satisfaction

Since WPD's baseline performance for its customer satisfaction score has risen from 89% to 91%, stakeholders were asked whether the company's proposed customer satisfaction target (90%) should be reviewed. The majority of stakeholders (69%) felt that this target showed an appropriate level of ambition. No stakeholders who expressed an opinion felt that the company should do less, but almost a third (31%) wanted the company to go further. One stakeholder responded 'don't know / can't say'.

Those in favour of retaining the 90% target explained that this is already a high score and cited the cost impact as a reason for not raising ambition further. One attendee suggested that rather than focusing on raising the target, WPD should instead address regional discrepancies in customer service levels. Similarly, it was noted that "trends are more interesting than targets" for some stakeholder groups, and focusing on improving other metrics such as power cut reductions would likely boost customer satisfaction scores. In contrast, stakeholders calling for greater ambition felt that WPD should continue striving to be the leader in its field.
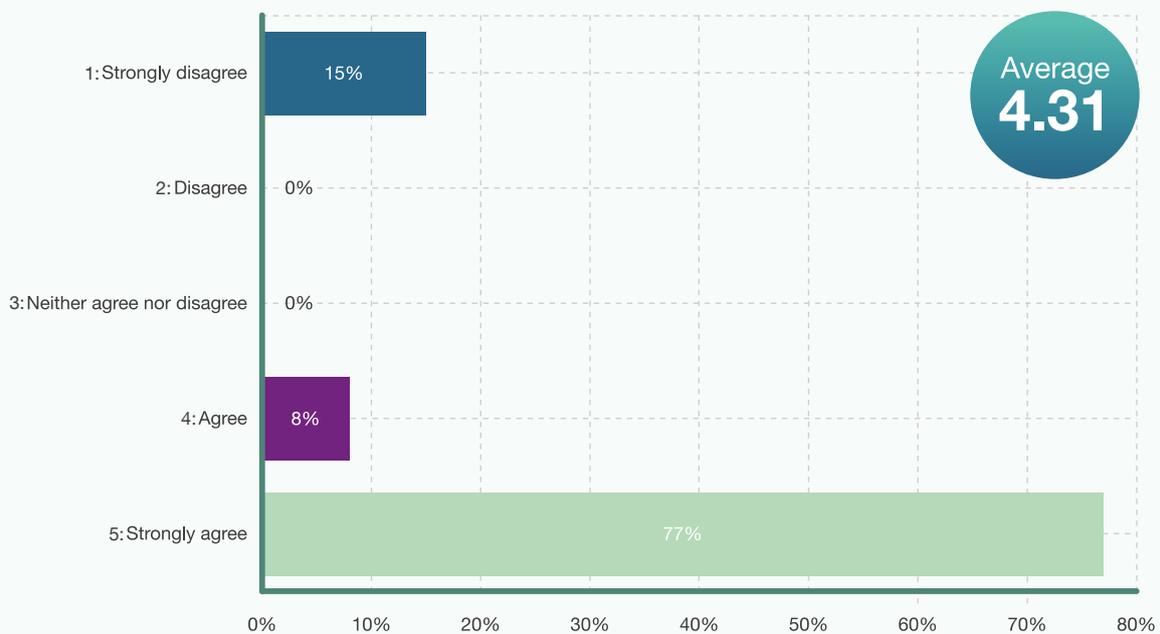
Verbatim comments and voting

Social media

Respond to social media enquiries within an average of five minutes and webchat enquiries within an average of one minute, 24 hours a day

1. Are you supportive of this commitment?

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
"WPD's social media response commitment is acceptable to me."

Response	Percentage
1: Strongly disagree	15%
2: Disagree	0%
3: Neither agree nor disagree	0%
4: Agree	8%
5: Strongly agree	77%

Average **4.31**

Don't know / can't say: 1/14

- "It's really good, it's really important. As long as this is on top of the core commitments, then I fully support it." **Environmental group**

- "I think this is a fantastic commitment. It's ambitious but when you're in the middle of a power cut you expect a response pretty quickly. I think it's very reasonable." **Connections provider**

- "A five-minute wait sounds quick, but if you are actually sitting there with the issue, then five minutes seems like a long time. Four-second response time is phenomenal. It's just the balance between improving the intervention and the cost of the intervention. It's not as easy as when it's a fault, and getting all the bodies required is tough." **Utility**

- "Lots of vulnerable people don't use social media and prefer to use the phone instead. The emergency black-out phone service has been automated now and the one time that I needed it, I got the information very quickly. There has been excellent progress on that front." **Community energy group**

- "The proposed response time for a webchat would create an express service. By contrast, HMRC takes six hours to get back to you on webchat, so this proposal would be amazing. I like the webchat focus, as you can do something else while waiting." **Community energy group**

- "I think that a response within five minutes is ok. The major problem is that a lot of our tenants are not on social media or online generally. In addition, they are very reluctant to report things online and would prefer to speak to someone face to face about issues." **Major connections customer**

- "I think it's good to be able to get answers, especially if it's something like a power cut where you want some reliable information, where you can go on and get an answer quickly." **Community energy group**

2.   Is there anything we could change to make it more acceptable to you?

- "I think this is good. I don't know how you could improve on this." **Connections provider**

- "For me, I think the focus here should be on the quality or outcome of the contact, rather than how quickly it is dealt with. I think that it would be better to wait longer to ensure that they give you what you need, rather than rushed through to hit a time-based target." **Vulnerable customer representative**

- "There needs to be a balance between online and phone customer service, particularly with broadband issues in parts of the South Wales operating area. The five-minute response time is amazing and should be praised." **Vulnerable customer representative**

- "I think what happens for many companies with a lot of customers is that their experience is that they don't get a great response from social; it's very generic and not about what's happening for them personally. At the moment it's just ticking a box and saying, 'We've got social', but it's not where it needs to be, so WPD needs to be aware of that." **Utility**

- "The only other comment is that it's not just about response times but it's about the quality of response as well. It's about satisfaction ratings, has my enquiry been answered adequately? I will also say that social media is tough because it's publicly visible and you have to be very thoughtful about what's been put up." **Academic institution**
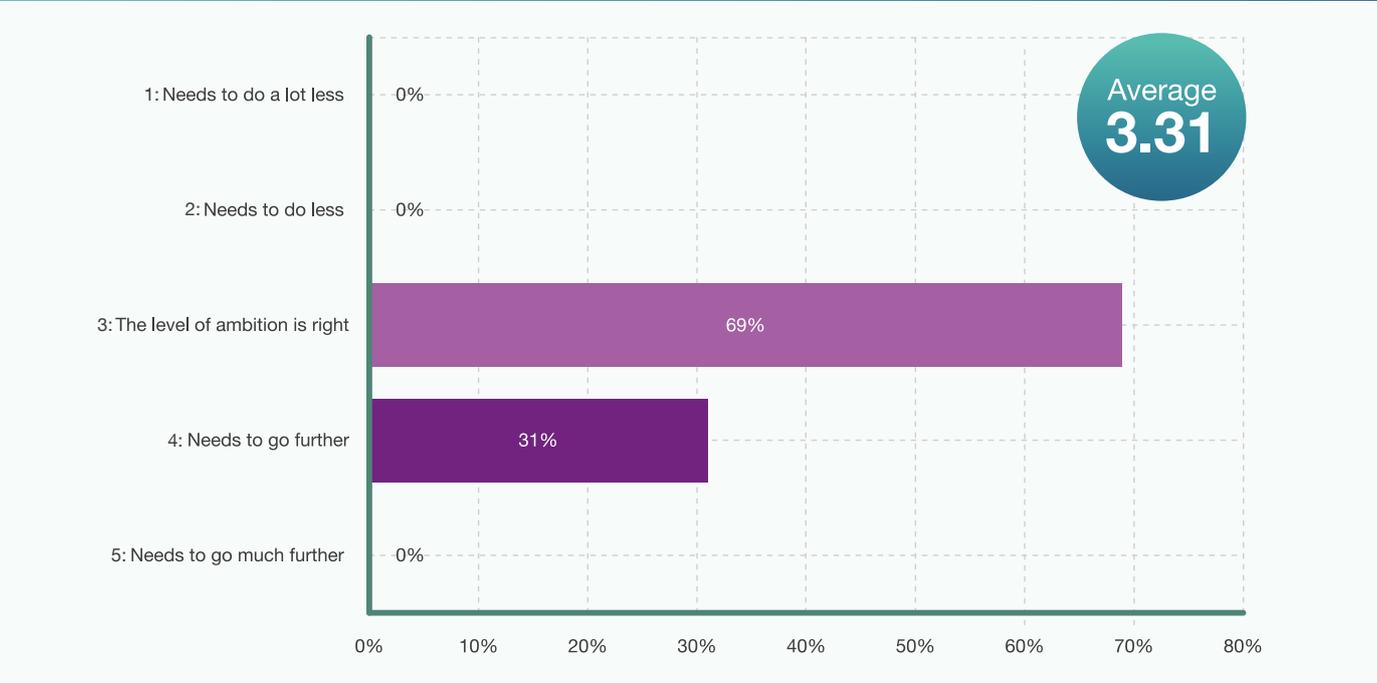
- "I don't see anything else that needs to be improved." **Community energy group**

- "As a general aim for customer service over the phone, I think that it would be perfect to offer customers a good answer within five minutes. If you can achieve that, I see no reason to change anything else." **Energy consultant**

Customer satisfaction

Achieve an average customer satisfaction score of 90% or higher across all key services areas, with separate reporting for emerging technology customers

1. What are your views on the level of this commitment in light of WPD's updated baseline performance?

What are your views on the level of ambition WPD is proposing (satisfaction score of 90%) for its commitment relating to customer satisfaction?

Average
3.31

1: Needs to do a lot less	0%
2: Needs to do less	0%
3: The level of ambition is right	69%
4: Needs to go further	31%
5: Needs to go much further	0%

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%

Don't know / can't say: 1/14

- "You should continue to strive to be the leading DNO." **Connections provider**

- "Is there any understanding of whether there's a limit to how many people you can ever satisfy? Do you get to the point where it's not possible to increase satisfaction any more due to the 8% of grumpy people out there?" **Community energy group**

- "If you're reducing your power cuts, then that should reduce low scores due to customer satisfaction anyway." **Environmental group**

- "There isn't a great difference between 91% and 90% for me. Both are very high."
  Vulnerable customer representative

- "90% is exceptional and there is no need to put the money into improving it."
  Vulnerable customer representative

2. Would you like to see our target change?

- "92% is really good, and we'd all like to be as close to 100 as possible, but given the increase to the bill I don't think it's justified to bring it up to 93. That money could be better spent elsewhere."
  Environmental group

- "These are quite impressive figures when you look at benchmark. It's difficult to push these figures any higher, it can start to become counterproductive anyway. It's just the question of whether there are regional discrepancies and discrepancies in what people are receiving." **Academic institution**

- "I would advocate for 92% if there is no cost impact." **Local authority**

- "You should always be striving for more. Some communication around that would be helpful for people to understand the obstacles regarding new connections. I understand there's an element of risk there." **Connections provider**

- "A simple one-figure number doesn't give the whole picture. Trends are more interesting than targets for some stakeholder groups. Certain groups will have a particular interest in different areas of customer satisfaction. You need to keep your finger on the pulse." **Academic institution**

- "I don't see that there needs to be an improvement to the score." **Energy consultant**

Workshop Three
Customer vulnerability

Richard Allcock, Stakeholder Engagement Manager, outlined WPD's core commitments under Customer Vulnerability. The breakout room discussion was focused on the acceptability, ambition and scope of four new and refined commitments: increasing registrations on the PSR to 75% of eligible customers; adding tailored resilience plans to the Power Cut Reporter App; appointing vulnerability champions at WPD depots; and implementing a criteria for vulnerability considerations when planning new schemes.

Summary

Priority Services Register

Stakeholders generally agreed with the proposed refinement to the PSR commitment, to increase registrations to 75% of eligible customers and target 80% of customers with critical medical needs, with a key comment being, "Any increase is good". This broad consensus was reflected in the electronic voting, where 80% either agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed refinement. Stakeholders also felt that the target was both ambitious and realistic, with a suggestion to more forensically target areas that are at higher risk of serious power cuts. It was cited that customers in rural areas were more interested in the PSR than those in urban areas, as they were more likely to suffer the effects of a severe power outage: targeting based on geographical location could therefore be an important gain for WPD in terms of increased sign-ups.

However, challenges to implementing the commitment were noted, with some feeling that many candidates for the PSR had never heard of it and may therefore be reluctant to sign up, so progress to expand numbers might be difficult. Indeed, some felt that the purpose of the PSR needed reviewing, as it was too focused on a "chase for numbers", and that more work on finding hard-to-reach customers would be of greater benefit. In this case, managing data sharing and protection was advocated, with the outcome of one cross-utility PSR to more easily and effectively target eligible customers.

Tailored resilience plans via the Power Cut Reporter App

There was some debate over this commitment: some praised the push for self-sufficiency, but others questioned whether people in already vulnerable situations were going to be inclined to take up this kind of technology. Some thought that the more connected devices there were, the greater the need for technical support, and some felt the commitment was too ambitious and possibly unachievable, in that some outages take out the mobile network, and therefore customers' ability to use the app. These more sceptical stakeholders advocated "analogue" solutions, such as light bulbs that illuminate during a power cut, backup battery solutions and increased support via landline and text message. These mixed opinions were borne out in the electronic voting, where 28% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the commitment, 43% strongly agreed or agreed, and 29% were neutral.

Vulnerability champions at depots

There was widespread approval of this commitment, with stakeholders pointing out that there could be synergies with other special interest champions within WPD, such as environment champions. It was also felt that more external training for staff in specialist fields could only be beneficial. This broad acceptance was reflected in the electronic voting, where 87% either agreed or strongly agreed with the commitment. However, it is worth noting that two respondents (13%) strongly disagreed. In the discussions, they expressed the opinion that these champions, while a good idea, needed to be out and on the ground, talking to communities, and not sequestered in the depots.
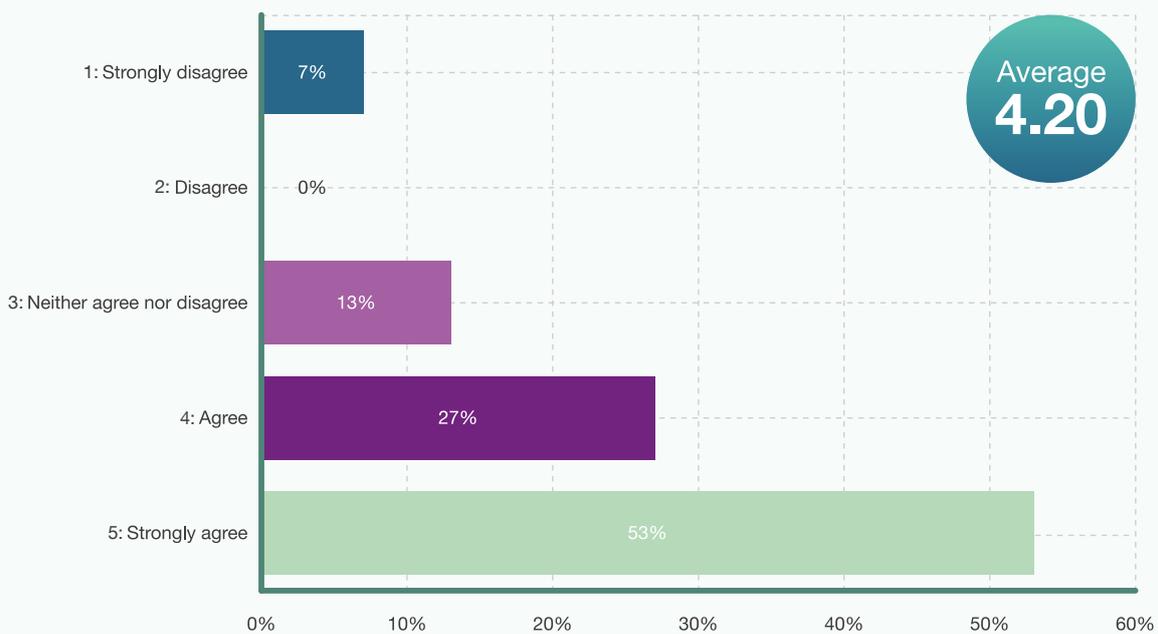
Criteria for vulnerability considerations

The majority of stakeholders felt positively about implementing a criteria for vulnerability considerations, and 87% either agreed or strongly agreed with the commitment, while only one stakeholder responded 'don't know / can't say'. Those in favour cited support for the consideration of the vulnerable during planning, and thought that it provided a "nice, neat special focus" within the business. The main driver for delegates in this regard was to ensure that decarbonisation initiatives were effective, fair and affordable for all customers. There were, however, two delegates (13%) who strongly disagreed with the commitment, and this came down to their concerns over the huge challenge of relying on vulnerable people to take up newer technologies to achieve net zero.

Verbatim comments and voting

Increase the number of customers registered on the Priority Services Register to 75% of total eligible customers, targeting 80% of customers with critical medical needs, including 50,000 hard-to-reach customers each year

**To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
"I agree with the proposed refinement to this commitment."**

Average
4.20

1: Strongly disagree	7%
2: Disagree	0%
3: Neither agree nor disagree	13%
4: Agree	27%
5: Strongly agree	53%

Don't know / can't say: 1/16

1. Do you agree with the proposed refinement?

- "It's good that the baseline has been revised and I wonder that given there's a focus on sharing PSR sign-ups, and that's going to drive up the number of customers you're going to get signed up to PSR anyway, does that target need revising upwards anyway? The target of targeting 80% of customers with critical medical needs is a good idea and it makes sense to target those." **Environmental group**

- "Any increase is good, so I generally agree. However, many people have never heard of the PSR, so large numbers are reluctant to go onto it, so that is a concern around making further progress. In addition, how does the cleansing process work on the PSR, as individual situations change and people need to come off it? How will that fit into this commitment?"
  Vulnerable customer representative

- "I think that the whole purpose of the PSR needs to be reviewed, as I feel that there is too much of a chase for numbers now. Instead, the focus needs to go back to finding hard-to-reach customers who need help. At the moment, too many people are on it that don't need to be on there – like me: I'm just over 60 and I'm healthy. Of course, older people living alone and people with life-altering illnesses need to be there." **Community energy group**

- "Another problem is that all utilities in a particular patch are managing their own PSRs. Wouldn't it be better to have data-sharing agreements in place so that we can create one big PSR? This would make it a lot easier to go above and beyond the target displayed here."
  Vulnerable customer representative

2. Is it ambitious enough?

- "I think it is ambitious enough. The difficulty with identifying vulnerable customers is that many won't want to acknowledge they're in a vulnerable situation." **Connections provider**

- "It looks ambitious but seems realistic. I still struggle with the fact that we're starting from a relatively low point. It would be great to be above this level by the end of ED2."
  Vulnerable customer representative

- "I would say definitely the targeting is a good idea. One thing is that we would like to target more by areas that are more at risk of power cuts and serious power cuts. It's one thing being off for 20 minutes but another thing if it's a longer period of time. In terms of the total eligible customers, there will always be older customers that are fit and well or in a nursing home that are well looked-after, so the targeting based on needs is important. We cover a very urban area and a very rural area, and the people in the rural areas are much more interested in the PSR because they might be fit and well, but a power cut will affect them more." **Community energy group**

- "It starts to become difficult the higher you move the target, because some of these customers are going to be hard to engage with." **Academic institution**
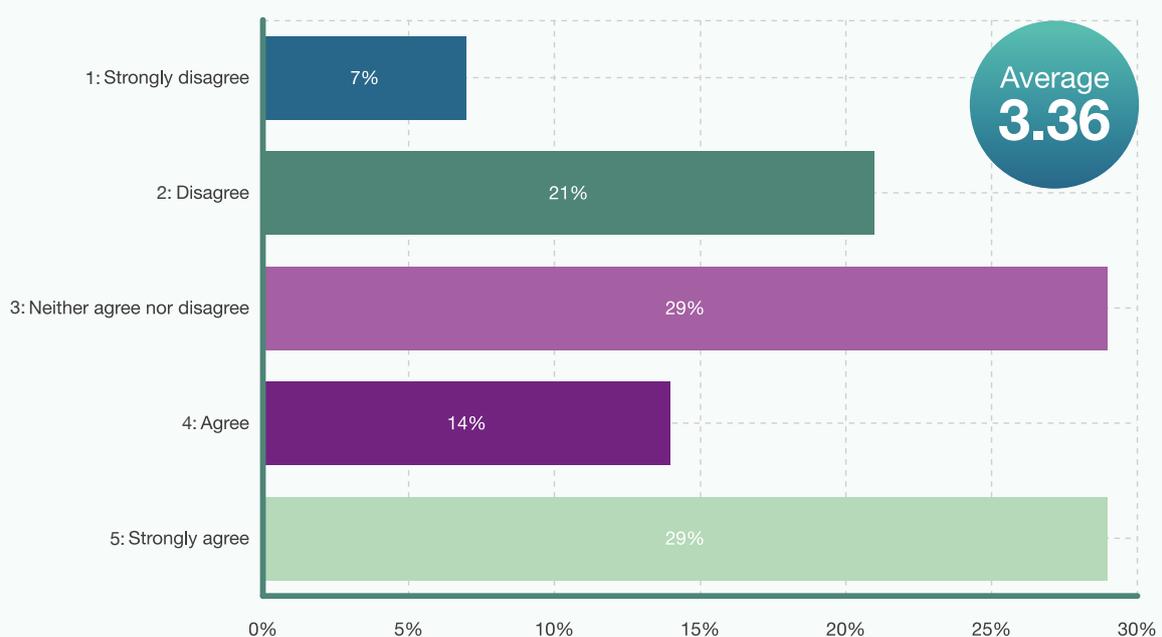
3. Is the proposed scope right?

- "I would expand the scope of the work here and try to partner with organisations like the ones here today, in order to assist us to instil the wider societal mindset shift to embrace vulnerability support."
  Vulnerable customer representative

4. Is anything missing?

- "The major challenge is that many people don't want to admit that they're vulnerable and aren't willing to go onto a register. Being on a list will make some feel even more vulnerable."
  Vulnerable customer representative

- "People don't know how the PSR works and how it could benefit them. All utilities need to work harder together in order to promote it. This would make it easier for us to sell it to these customers."
  Vulnerable customer representative

Add a feature to the app which enables customers to create their own tailored personal resilience plans in the event of a power cut

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
"I agree with the proposed refinement to this commitment."

1: Strongly disagree	7%
2: Disagree	21%
3: Neither agree nor disagree	29%
4: Agree	14%
5: Strongly agree	29%

Average **3.36**

Don't know / can't say: 1/15

1. Do you agree with the proposed refinement?

- "This is another option to allow people to be more self-sufficient, which I'm in favour of." **Connections provider**

- "I think it would be useful. We've just launched an app within our business that is internal rather than external. Have you actually launched an app with customers and have you got take-up? Because people often won't download it just to hear about power cuts." **Utility**

- "Particularly if it's incorporated with the Priority Services Register, these plans seem good, but I just wonder if the types of people affected would be the ones that would fiddle around with a map just because of a specific set of circumstances." **Community energy group**

- "I think the level of technical support required for vulnerable users will increase because of connected devices." **Academic institution**

2. Is it ambitious enough?

- "A bit of a concern is that this is difficult to achieve and going a bit far. One thing is that any outage takes out the local mobile network and therefore affects the ability of some critical customers to alert family and friends to the fact that they've had a power cut." **Academic institution**

3. Is the proposed scope right?

- "You should liaise with organisations supporting vulnerable customers. Batteries could be used to guarantee supply for certain vulnerable users." **Academic institution**
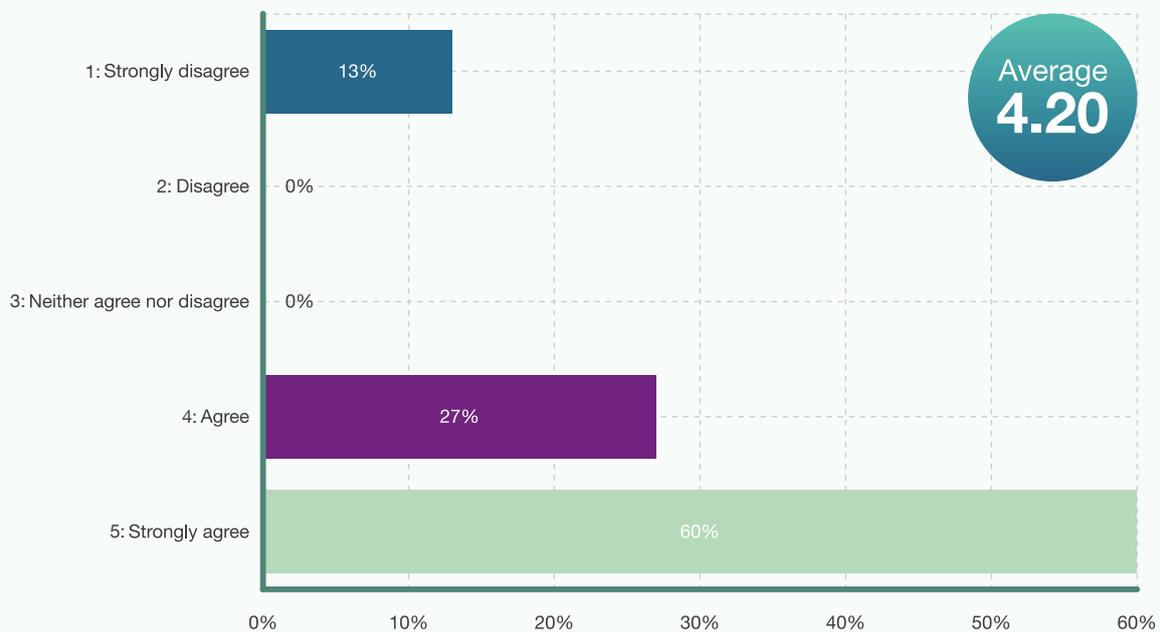
4. Is anything missing?

- "I don't know what the level of technical support is that WPD can give or whether you can do this in a more analogue way with certain households." **Local authority**

- "Those light bulbs that light up in a power cut could be put in any power cut pack."
Community energy group

- "A lot of people we deal with wouldn't download an app just to come up with a personal resilience plan. I wonder if an app is the right way to focus if it's for vulnerable customers. One of the things, with letting family know, could be done via text or phone call. I'm in the sceptical group, because there are a lot of other things that can be out in place. Power cut packs are good for PSR customers, because a lot of customers have landlines that don't really work. Having torches that plug in and provide background light when there's a power cut works well." **Environmental group**

Additional commitment: appoint vulnerability champions at our depots to act as a point of contact for staff and to raise awareness of our vulnerability programme

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
"I agree with the proposed additional commitment."

Average
4.20

1: Strongly disagree	13%
2: Disagree	0%
3: Neither agree nor disagree	0%
4: Agree	27%
5: Strongly agree	60%

Don't know / can't say: 1/16

1. Do you agree with the additional commitment?

- "I think this is a really good idea. It ties into other special interest champions within the operational structure of WPD, such as environment." **Academic institution**

- "I'm in favour of this. It's good that there's an external element with training." **Local authority**

- "When I initially read that every innovation scheme would support vulnerability, I thought, 'Why not every scheme?' Champions are good, I like that." **Environmental group**

- "It's about getting the boys and girls out in the field to have the confidence that they can speak to people and spread the message." **Utility**
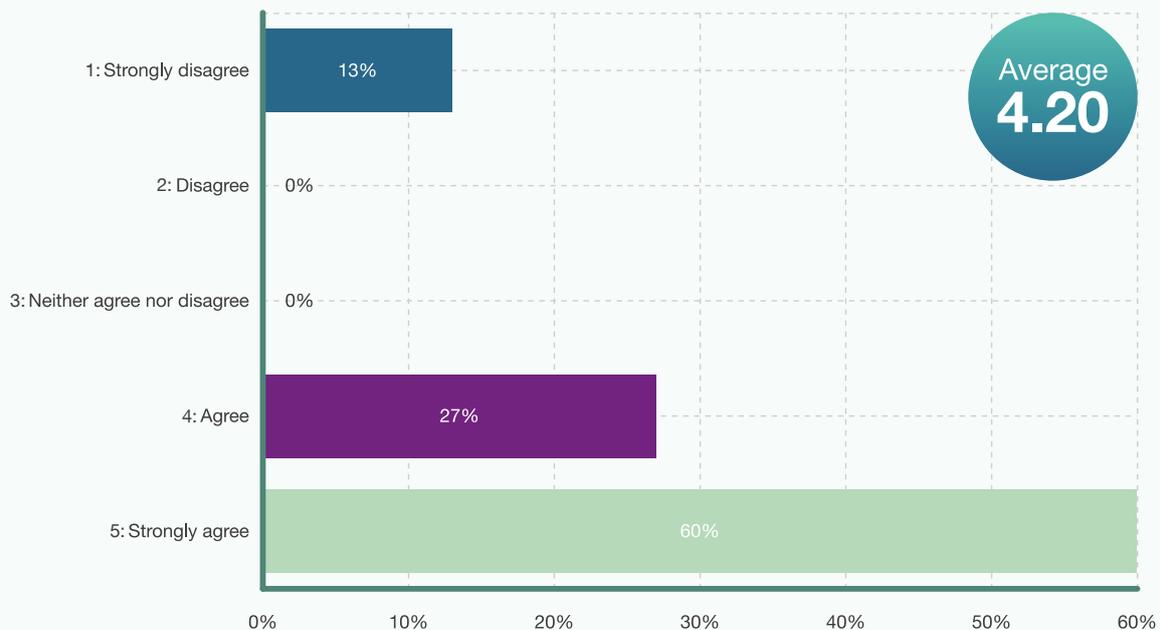
2. Is the proposed scope right?

- "We definitely need more people in this area, but they need to be on the ground talking to communities rather than holed up in WPD depots. That will spread the message more effectively."
Vulnerable customer representative

Additional commitment: implement a criteria for vulnerability considerations when planning new schemes across all areas of the business

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
"I agree with this additional commitment."

Response	Percentage
1: Strongly disagree	13%
2: Disagree	0%
3: Neither agree nor disagree	0%
4: Agree	27%
5: Strongly agree	60%

Average
4.20

Don't know / can't say: 1/16

1. Do you agree with the additional commitment?

- "This provides a nice, neat special focus within the business. Immediately embedding these special interests within your operation is a positive thing and feeds into the community of the organisation." **Academic institution**

- "I'm very supportive of this. It's good that you're considering vulnerable users in your planning." **Connections provider**

- "I agree with this and feel that a strong and effective PSR database would act as a foundation stone for making sure that decarbonisation initiatives are effective, fair and affordable for all customers." **Environmental group**

- "Possibly, but it's going to be a huge challenge, particularly if you think about the resistance to smart meters. It's going to be so much worse trying to get vulnerable people to take up heat pumps, as they have more pressing priorities." **Consumer body**

2. Is the proposed scope right?

- "I'm not sure whether relying on vulnerable people to take up newer technologies will be an effective route to net zero. We have a long way to go on the whole trust issue around utility companies among this group, so it will take a while." **Consumer body**

- "I agree with the point about reluctance of vulnerable people to embrace new technologies. We're trying to sell heat pumps all the time and they don't understand what they do and would prefer double-glazing and a new boiler instead." **Vulnerable customer representative**

- "We have trialled new technologies in some of our homes, but we ended up ripping them out, as tenants just don't trust them." **Major connections customer**

Workshop Four
Social Contract

Eleanor Patey, Social Obligations Manager, outlined WPD's Social Contract focus areas – Environmental Stewardship, Enriching Communities and Employer of Choice – and its refined commitment on volunteering. In the breakout sessions, delegates discussed whether the focus areas were acceptable and ambitious enough, and whether they were satisfied with the reworked commitment on staff volunteer days.

Summary

Focus areas

Stakeholders were overwhelmingly positive about the focus areas of the Social Contract, and this was borne out in the electronic voting, where 92% indicated approval. Suggesting areas where WPD could go even further, some wanted to see more focus on emergency response and community support in the event of a flood or natural disaster, under Environmental Stewardship and Enriching Communities; and diversity and inclusion under Employer of Choice. Others, while appreciating the intentions of the Social Contract, saw a challenge for WPD in some areas in that they are not known to customers as the provider of their energy. The critical importance of building trust and visibility in order to support communities and carry out the goals of the Social Contract was therefore emphasised.

Staff volunteering days

The proposed refinement to WPD's staff volunteering days initiative, to ensure the work undertaken is of clear benefit to customers, was also received very positively, with 100% voting their approval, minus one stakeholder who did not feel qualified to answer. The focus on STEM, vulnerability and providing meal support to customers impacted by works were singled out for praise, with others feeling that the commitment might help WPD overcome the barrier of trust and visibility among its customers. Delegates offered advice on making volunteering meaningful and impactful, advocating careful planning and integration with the overall goals of the Social Contract. This could see staff attending community events and giving advice on decarbonisation for low-income households, or combining flood management with wetland and biodiversity support. In all cases, WPD were urged to "embed" staff in their volunteer work to make a lasting impact: "Don't parachute people in and out".

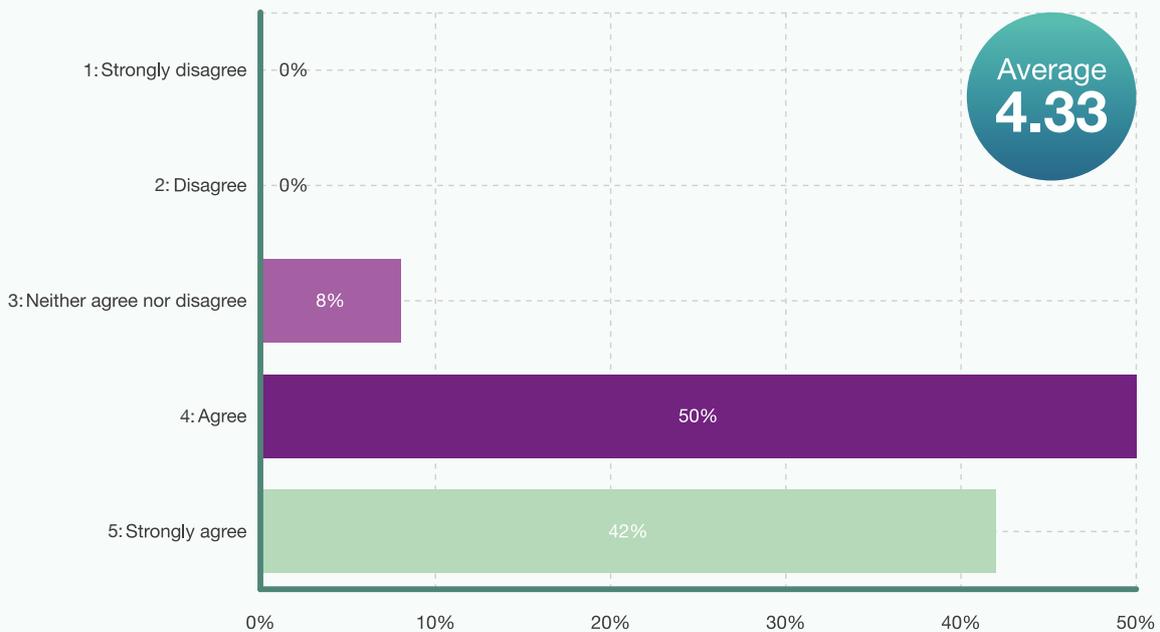### Delivery of the Social Contract

Transparency and reporting on initiatives were seen to be key in this area, and there was a real appetite from delegates to stay informed. On the topic of shareholder-funded support for local organisations, delegates wanted information about what is available, regular reports and more support with accessibility. Making good use of WPD's website and social media was also suggested as a way to signpost initiatives for communities and interested partners, while these outlets could also serve as a dedicated point of contact at WPD. There was little support for penalties for not delivering on certain aspects of the Social Contract, with a consensus that "honesty is the best policy" and that learning from mistakes, engagement and transparency were valuable attributes, and did more to build trust in the long term.

Verbatim comments and voting

1. Do you agree with the proposed focus areas?

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
"I agree with the proposed focus areas for WPD's Social Contract."

Average
4.33

1: Strongly disagree	0%
2: Disagree	0%
3: Neither agree nor disagree	8%
4: Agree	50%
5: Strongly agree	42%

Don't know / can't say: 1/13

- "I've worked on this as part of my role on the CEG and I think it's really good. Certain elements in terms of customer value and employee value are always being worked on." **Academic institution**

- "To me it makes sense the way it's set out currently; I can't think of any things to add or that you might have missed." **Environmental group**

- "It's a very sensible presentation of it. Admittedly in some of these areas there are obligations, and they do feed into the business plan because you're obliged to meet these. It's a healthy distinction to make if you separate these out." **Academic institution**

- "There's a good opportunity there, with the interest in a decentralised system. Although WPD's name isn't as well known as suppliers, it's a constant, so there's value in that. Doing these things will benefit WPD in the long term." **Environmental group**

- "Looking at the focus areas, they are customer- and business-focussed. I feel that you have everything covered and I have nothing further to add." **Major connections customer**
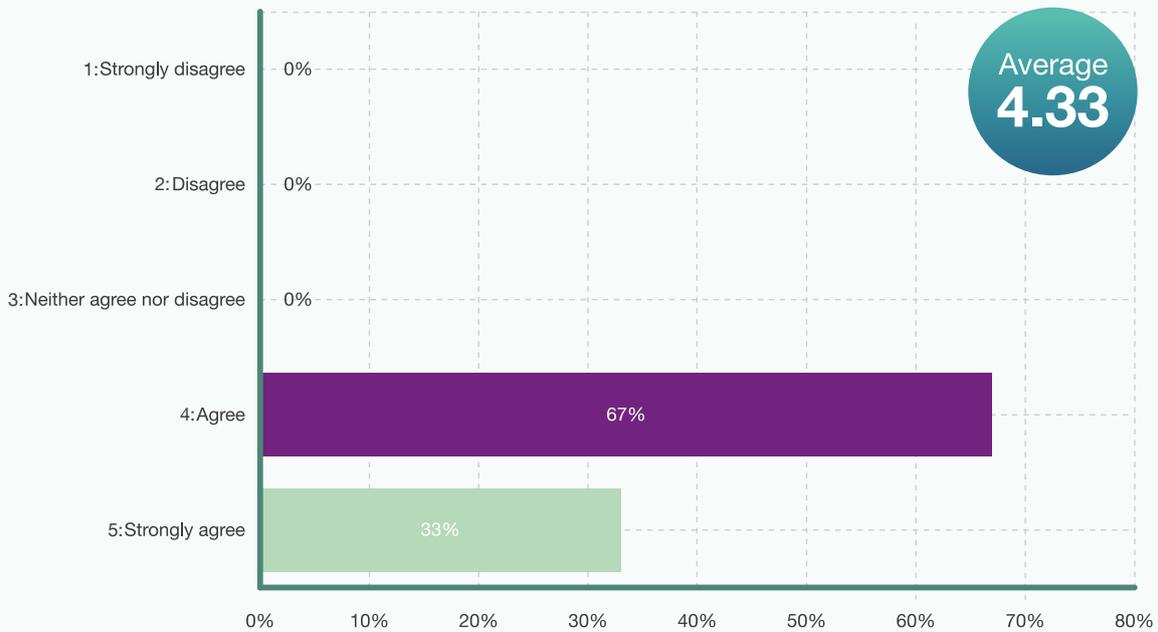
2. Is anything missing?

- "I don't think anything is missing. I think this is a good visual representation of the core elements and everything above that." **Local authority**

- "For me, I find the Employer of Choice should be done by WPD anyway, so for me the focus areas are the empowered communities and environmental steward things, and looking at the communities and social mobility side of things is more important for me." **Environmental group**

- "A lot of it is about your community engagement and reaching out into those communities that you are the DNO for. One of the problems for a network operator is that consumer relationship. The problem you've always got is that you're not the name on the bill, even though you supply the power to that household. It gives an opportunity for WPD to create a public visibility that you don't unfortunately get because of how we do our billing. You don't have that consumer relationship, and it's only a problem when the lights go off. It's that difficult thing, because there's all these things going on in the background and how do you provide support to customers that need it while also taking care of the environmental impacts?" **Academic institution**

- "I suppose that it could be covered by some of the topics, but I just wonder whether there is enough focus on emergency response, such as when there is a flood or another natural disaster. Something about supporting communities through these times could be something else that could be captured." **Vulnerable customer representative**

- "Even though they appear here, diversity and inclusion did not come out hugely in the presentation, so it would be good to see WPD doing more in this context to try to attract different people into the sector." **Environmental group**

3. Do you agree with the proposed refinement?

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
"I agree with the proposed refinement WPD has made to its initiative on staff volunteering days."

1:Strongly disagree	0%
2:Disagree	0%
3:Neither agree nor disagree	0%
4:Agree	67%
5:Strongly agree	33%

Average **4.33**

Don't know / can't say: 1/13

- "I'm supportive of this. Especially STEM and vulnerability. Providing meal support to those impacted by the works is a lovely thing." **Connections provider**

- "Yes. It's aspirational and about improving rather than penalties."
  Vulnerable customer representative

- "I would have no problem, and I can see what's happened, that it's been hardened to focus more on sphere of influence within WPD, and that it's been focussed on what WPD is able to do. With these outreach roles, you're getting over the barrier that you haven't got the direct customer relationship until the lights go off." **Academic institution**

- "I think that this refinement would make it easier to target useful volunteering more effectively. The main thing that I would recommend here is consulting with the groups delivering the programmes to ensure that the volunteers are used in the best way." **Environmental group**

- "Staff volunteering can be useful, but, as a charity, I have seen companies trying to shoehorn staff into charitable initiatives for the sake of it or in an attempt to look good, so I do feel slightly wary about the volunteer days. You need to ensure that you are only involved in initiatives that add value to the communities." **Environmental group**

- "I used to run a volunteer centre, and the most important piece of advice that I would give around volunteering is that you must ensure that you embed a volunteer into the organisation's work and ensure that they really understand it. Don't parachute people in and out."
Vulnerable customer representative

- "I think that the volunteers need to be fitted into a carefully drafted plan. In a year or so, we are looking to be doing a lot more with how decarbonisation will affect low-income households, particularly with heat pumps and EV charging points. It would be good to have some WPD experts available for community events to provide this advice." **Community energy group**

- "You could have a combination of flood management with wetland and biodiversity support. Working with environmental groups as well as on flood risk management can create opportunities."
Academic institution

- "It's frustrating when staff volunteers are unable to make worthwhile commitments in terms of their time. It has to be a meaningful commitment, not just an hour a week."
Vulnerable customer representative

- "Something of particular interest is around community energy and providing support to those. The '1,000 volunteer days per year' sounds great, but how many staff do you have? With 6,000 staff that's a couple of hours per year per employee, and looking at other employers in other sectors it's a lot higher. They often have 1-2 days per year as volunteer days, so that's a challenge there."
Environmental group

5. How would you like to be involved and kept up to date?

- "A lot of people like to understand what we're doing and where the money is going. Transparency and being able to report on these types of initiatives are key." **Connections provider**

- "The shareholder-funded support for local organisations, for example, that's a lot of funding that you're going to be distributing. I imagine this would be administered through some kind of scheme and using local partners would be really useful. I'm just not sure what the expertise and experience within WPD is with regard to distributing grants; can you make it not too onerous for those that are receiving the grants? It would be good to get regular reports on the distribution of those grants."
  Environmental group

- "It could be useful to have something on the website saying what's available. In addition, I would use social media to publicise upcoming events and people who are available to help in local areas."
  Community energy group

- "I feel that it would be really beneficial to work with your partners delivering the customer vulnerability initiatives. Maybe some kind of single point of contact with WPD could help, as we could talk to people when we are developing our projects and there is scope for a WPD member of staff to be involved." **Environmental group**

6. What should happen, in the unlikely event we under-deliver?

- "Honesty is the best policy. Acknowledging when things don't go right is what people want."
  Connections provider

- "Normally in contracts you have penalty clauses. This isn't about that. It's about acknowledging that you're trying your best and looking to engage and improve if things don't go right to start with."
  Academic institution

Appendix 1
Participants

A total of 21 stakeholders attended the workshop, representing 18 organisations. The organisations represented on the day are shown below:

Accent

Centre for Sustainable Energy

Coventry Citizens Advice

Customer Engagement Group

Electricity North West

Sense

Herefordshire Council

Marches Energy Agency

Morrison Energy Services

North and West Gloucestershire Citizens Advice

Sirio Multilateral Strategies Ltd

SMS Plc

South East Wales Energy Agency

The Schumacher Institute

Warm Wales

Wattify Ltd

Wolverhampton Homes

WPD CEG

Appendix 2
Workshop feedback

Overall, how satisfied were you with today's workshop?

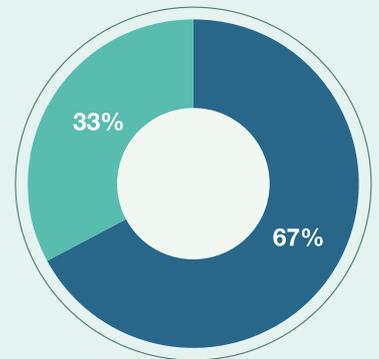On average, stakeholders rated their satisfaction 9 out of 10.

Overall, did you find this workshop to be:

33%
67%

- Very interesting
- Interesting
- Neutral
- Not that interesting
- Not interesting at all
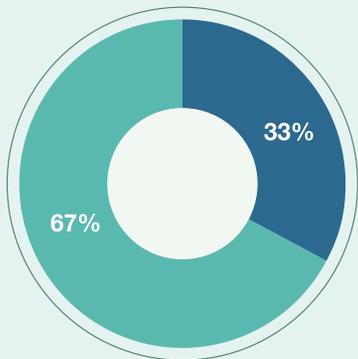
Did you feel that you had the opportunity to make your points and ask questions?

33%
67%

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
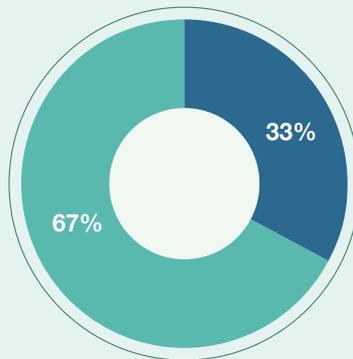
Did we cover the right topics for you on the day?

33%
67%

- Strongly agree
- Agree
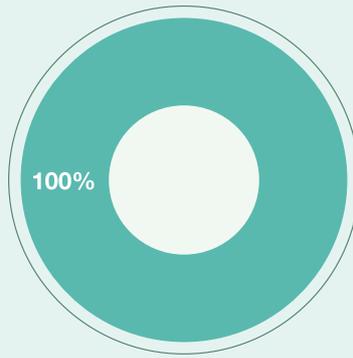- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

What did you think of the way the workshop was chaired by your facilitator?

33%

67%
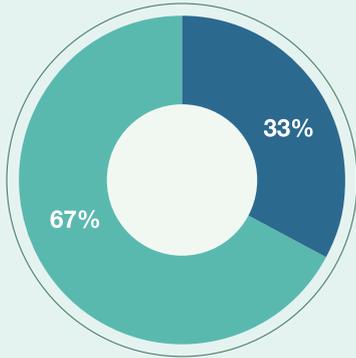
- Very good
- Good
- Neutral
- Poor
- Very poor

How well do you think the online format worked?

100%

- Very well
- Well
- Neutral
- Not well
- Not well at all

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