



Spotlight Report 2021/22

An independent report written by the WPD Customer Panel

Introduction

The Customer Panel (The 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, though for both 2020 and 2021 these were held remotely.

Following feedback from Panel members the future plan is to endeavour to continue with a mix of remote and face to face meetings enabling the widest participation whilst also ensuring that we can benefit from the better ideas generation that inevitably takes place face-to-face. The introduction of 'surgeries' (trialled at the end of last year), more of which is detailed later in the report, will assist with keeping the meetings relevant and productive for both WPD and the Panel members themselves.

The Panel itself has been in place for 14 years and currently has a pool of 29 permanent, expert members. During the year different Panel members have attended each meeting, but all members receive the relevant slide pack(s) and were encouraged to comment or provide ideas and feedback remotely.

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.

Make up

The Panel continues to be 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 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 health and leisure sectors. The following sectors are currently represented:

- MPs and Government
- 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

“Our enduring Customer Panel remains a core element of our stakeholder engagement programme. Members are honest and critical and often evaluate new and existing projects then co-create solutions with us, ensuring the best possible outcomes for customers and the communities we serve. Recently the Panel played a key role in the development of our Social Contract, establishing a subgroup that enabled us to further refine our focus areas and strategic approach”

- Nicki Johnson, Stakeholder Engagement Officer

Executive Summary

Western Power Distribution is changing its name to National Grid as it is now part of the National Grid Group. The Panel was kept abreast of the changes at each meeting. The company is now the largest electricity transmission and distribution business in the UK, ready to meet the huge increase in demand for electricity inevitable in the years ahead. Customers are being reassured the service will remain the same. The same teams are responsible for maintaining the electricity grid across the region and will continue to support local communities. Customers can still contact WPD in the same way and 105 is still the number to call to report a power cut.

The past year continued 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 continuing turbulent time.

Although Covid-19 continued to be an issue in 2021/22, its impact on WPD and the Panel was considerably less than in the previous year, particularly given the changes that had been put in place in terms of remote working. The Panel continued to focus on the strategic priorities previously agreed with stakeholders and continued to scrutinise, challenge and provide advice to WPD as it worked towards its newest business plan – which will cover the RII0-ED2 price control period for five years from April 2023.

Although there was less collaboration with the Customer Engagement Group (CEG) than in the previous year this was clearly influenced by the advanced nature of the business plan and reduced requirement for scrutiny as targets, funding and focus were confirmed.

Focus areas this year included

- Launch of the Social Contract
- Continuing to provide feedback on WPD's Business Plan for RIIO-ED2, including reviewing previous stakeholder insight and refining the proposed commitments in detail
- Additional support for the Community Matters Fund
- The continuation of a number of sub-groups to sound out and test projects, communications and new innovative ideas,
- Piloting additional Surgeries, interspersed with the Panel meetings to focus on specific areas, and
- A nascent 'buddying' system to provide one to one support to WPD staff by Panel members with specific and relevant expertise

The Panel continues to set the agenda for meetings and request attendance by relevant WPD staff. Underlining this has been the creation of a 12 month plan which provides an early indication of what topics are planned to be covered. This provides the dual advantage of enabling Panel members to see far in advance which meetings they are likely to want to attend (and potentially move around other commitments to enable attendance), but also provides WPD with advance notice of which staff will be required for which meeting. Obviously agendas change with the circumstances, such as Panel members requesting feedback on storms, but the advent of the 12 month plan has enabled a greater degree of certainty than in previous years.

2021/22 - a year in focus

Launch of WPD Social Contract

Having been central to the development of WPD's first Social Contract, this year the Customer Panel's role evolved to provide insight and challenge on the contract's delivery. Working on a one-to-one basis proved an effective approach to testing Social Contract concepts in a community context, where the Panel member's network and deep local knowledge provided a 'test bed' for piloting a number of WPD's commitments including: solar panels on schools; science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) education; the community energy engineer role; and, biodiversity and habitat restoration.

Close collaboration at the individual community level, and challenge from the Customer Panel member, drove greater connectivity between Social Contract initiatives by demonstrating how different WPD business areas could offer multi-faceted solutions to social and environmental problems. This successful one-to-one partnership has also been key to the development of the Customer Panel "buddy system", connecting WPD business owners with Panel members who have interest and expertise in specific areas.

New Surgeries

With the move to zoom meetings it had been difficult for the Panel to cover as much ground as in previous years – no one wants to be on zoom all day. Our solution to this problem was to bring in topic specific surgeries, held between Panel meetings, which enabled a detailed focus on a single topic. Holding these separately to the main Panel also enabled us to invite external experts to take part or present.

Topics this year included:

- **Employee Relations** - covering issues such as succession planning, identification of new roles for a Net Zero future, staff training, apprenticeships, staff volunteering, Investors in People and mental health, with a specific focus on covid-19.
- **Electric Vehicles** - covering WPD fleet, domestic connections for EVs (including predicted growth), results from Electric Nation pilot, Local Authority charging. During this surgery we were also fortunate to have a presentation from Panel member William Baker with interim results of the energy systems catapult Equal EV project which looked to explore barriers for people living with disabilities switching to electric vehicles (EVs).

These surgeries have proven very successful with very positive feedback from both WPD and the Panel. Having them separately from the main Panel meetings ensures that only those Panel members with specific expertise, knowledge or interest in a specific topic need to attend and also allows time for a truly deep dive into the detail of each topic.

Another benefit of these surgeries was that external experts brought in to attend have then joined the Panel as permanent members. Indeed in 2021/22 the Panel welcomed four new members.

“The surgery on Electric Vehicles was really well attended and we were pleased to update the Panel on EV forecasting and growth, how we are turning innovation into BAU and the WPD fleet strategy. It is extremely useful to consider critique from the Panel and build it into our actions – such as increasing the publicity covering Low Carbon Technologies and our journey to net zero so customers and stakeholders are informed and engaged.”

- Christopher Mayall, Transport Manager

A real feature of the Panel this year has been the additional support that members have been able to provide outside of Panel meetings, often on a one to one basis, with the WPD staff member responsible for the specific area, or as part of a subgroup. Whilst this support has often emerged from the surgeries with members providing, or offering, help and advice with the Community Matters fund, storm feedback and analysis of lessons learned, sharing suicide prevention training materials, etc. it was also evident in the way Panel members have worked to support WPD in provision of the Social Contract, as mentioned above, and the subgroup guidance for delivery of the Vulnerability hub. Following the success of this additional support we are now developing a full ‘buddying system’ to continue to facilitate this work.

Community Matters

This year the Panel continued to support the Community Matters fund. The fund, which was launched as a specific response to covid-19, has become a permanent fixture of WPD’s wider community support package. The funding is directed towards community groups looking for sustainable, targeted benefit in local communities. With five strategic themes, 871 local organisations have already been supported. Clearly, once the framework had been developed it made sense to build on it and the Panel was delighted to hear that it would continue to be supported by shareholders, to the tune of £1m a year, with no impact on bill payers. WPD consulted widely with the Panel, asking for ideas for key topics for future phases, seeking advice on how best to publicise the fund and accepting help with promotion. A key challenge raised by the Panel has been around the decision to allocate funds per license area, rather than assessing which population or area may be most in need. This issue is still being considered.



Priority Service Register (PSR)

The vulnerability hub within WPD’s website was developed in collaboration with the Customer Panel. It went live last year following support, development and testing from a subgroup of Panel members. The Panel asked for ‘call me back’ function which is currently being worked on and other improvements, including the facility for charities and community organisations, for example, to sign up to be referral partners (and help their clients join the PSR) are working well.

Updated vulnerability mapping has provided a new base level for the PSR, but the Panel still shared concerns that eligibility is much higher than the actual numbers on the register. Discussions with Panel members and with other stakeholders led WPD to raise the target to 75% of those eligible, but

with an 80% target for those customers with medical dependencies. The Panel continues to emphasize that focus is not on numbers but about percentages of those eligible and also continues to endorse WPDs cleansing of the register every two years. A big focus going forward will be about ensuring that the register can keep up with the changing circumstances of customers, particularly in light of the current cost of living crisis and the growth in numbers of people in fuel poverty.

Storms

Any annual report wouldn't be complete without mentioning this year's storms, particularly Arwen in November 2021, followed by Dudley, Eunice and Franklin all in February 2022. Whilst there have been reviews to look at resilience, infrastructure, communication and compensation, the Panel have focussed on the customer journey and staff welfare. Rather than wanting to know the percentage of people reconnected within 24 or 48 hrs the Panel challenge was around how long the longest connection took. We appreciated hearing about additional provision on phones or web chat for incoming contacts, but we also wanted to hear about staff welfare for those working longer hours or taking on additional tasks outside of their usual remit, especially with regard to ramping up PSR outgoing calls. Furthermore, as well as staff fixing faults quickly to support customers in need, we asked about welfare when fixing faults in dangerous circumstances, or having worked long hours, possibly outside of their usual area.



“The probing questions from the Customer Panel continue to keep us on our toes. Safety remains our number one priority and we continue to welcome discussions with the Panel where feedback is positively received and used to drive improvements”

- Alison Sleightholm, Regulation and Corporate Director

For the future

Our next big topic will be helping WPD with design, and later delivery of, Smart Energy Plans. The Panel will have a specific focus on ensuring that vulnerable customers are not left behind in the transition to a smart energy future.

We will be holding a 'Publications review' surgery, ensuring that any external facing documents which mention the PSR are both accessible and user friendly. A community Energy Surgery will focus on how best WPD can support local provision and connection and the wider benefits to those local communities.

A particular theme, which became more evident this year, was the lack of awareness of who WPD are and what they do for some customers. The Panel identified many great initiatives within WPD, but felt that these were not always widely communicated externally. Although the Panel itself is always available to help with promotion, this is an area where we feel more work is needed and will be a focus for 2022.

However, uppermost on the agenda will be a review of Ofgem Business Plan draft determinations.

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