

Electricity
Distribution

Supporting customer resilience during the cost-of-living crisis

Stakeholder Workshop Report
November 2023



nationalgrid

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Introduction

On 1 November 2023, National Grid Electricity Distribution (NGED) hosted a workshop to discuss how the company can support the resilience of its customers during the cost-of-living crisis. The workshop sought feedback from stakeholders on its vulnerable customer strategy – in particular, what NGED can do to help support its customers facing fuel poverty, deliver a just energy transition, and expand its support for customers this coming winter.

The workshop was run in a hybrid format, hosted simultaneously in person at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre and online using Zoom. Each session consisted of a short presentation given by an NGED representative or partner, followed by facilitated group discussions at roundtables or in virtual breakout rooms, where feedback was noted down by scribes. In addition, attendees were also asked to provide feedback via the Slido online voting platform.

The event was divided into four sessions:

1. NGED's vulnerable customer strategy
2. NGED's fuel poverty delivery model
3. Smart energy showcase
4. Winter preparedness

The event was attended by 67 attendees representing a range of different stakeholder groups, including charities, community energy groups, utilities and energy consultants. Many of the participants were NGED's partners in its work around vulnerable customers and fuel poverty.

NGED instructed EQ Communications, a specialist stakeholder engagement consultancy, to independently facilitate the event and to take notes of the comments made by stakeholders. This document summarises the feedback received. Every effort has been made to faithfully record the feedback given. To encourage candour and open debate, comments have not been ascribed to individuals. No differentiation has been made between feedback gathered from the virtual and in-person elements of the workshop.

Executive Summary



Executive summary

An overview of the major themes raised by stakeholders during each session is presented below, along with a summary of the feedback from the event feedback form and a summary of the participants by stakeholder type and region.

Session 1:

NGED's vulnerable customer strategy

- The primary concern among stakeholders was the financial burden of energy bills for customers, which was triggering widespread anxiety and mental health issues. The unrelenting demand for support was also pinpointed as a major issue, with the resources of assistance organisations stretched to the limit and solutions restricted to firefighting through short-term interventions.
- During Slido voting, 'Debt' and 'Poverty' were identified as the top challenges facing communities represented by stakeholders, with 10 votes each. At the same time, 'Funding' emerged as the main challenge for the organisations represented at the event, as voted for by 11 respondents (see word clouds on p.14).
- NGED was advised to focus on three key areas to support customers: effective communication about available support, long-term assistance and financing frameworks, and collaboration to provide targeted aid to vulnerable demographics. They stressed that a balance must be struck between delivering immediate, people-focused initiatives, and undertaking wider strategic planning.
- The key aims for 2024 identified by stakeholders included embedding the concept of inclusivity even more deeply into community engagement, and addressing public trust issues in terms of the company and smart technology. Attendees were also keen to see NGED enhance service accessibility to ensure that its support could get to everyone who needs it.

Session 2:

NGED's fuel poverty distribution model

- Stakeholders largely recognised the Horizon Scan findings as being representative of their own experiences. Overall, the challenges of unstable funding, rising demand for support, and a 'crisis mode' operational approach resonated most strongly with them. These issues had been exacerbated by the inconsistent support available and the transient nature of support programmes.
- Attendees put forward a number of approaches to address the Horizon Scan's recommendations. Key proposals included a unified funding and referral system to simplify support access, enhanced skills training for advice agencies, and greater leveraging of demographic data and smart technology to tailor emergency responses and support vulnerable communities.
- There was a consensus that partnership work between NGED and stakeholders should focus on increasing awareness of fuel poverty support. Many believed that leveraging trusted frontline community workers to signpost the support available would be the best approach, and some urged the company to provide grassroots groups with training to maximise the outcomes of these efforts.
- Many of the fuel-poverty best practices were rooted in local face-to-face engagement, such as community energy champions, as these would take a holistic approach to vulnerability. Others stressed the importance of digital outreach to get to younger demographics, using social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok.

Session 3: Smart energy showcase

- Attendees noted that during discussions with customers, the customers were outlining significant potential barriers to adopting smart energy, including high costs, overly complex information about smart tariffs, and a general mistrust of utilities and the new technologies involved. NGED was therefore encouraged to increase its engagement in this area in order to alleviate confusion and address public fears.
- Other major barriers to smart-energy adoption among vulnerable groups were put forward, including digital exclusion, language barriers, and fears of surveillance. Attendees suggested a number of solutions anchored in accessible engagement and communications strategies for vulnerable demographics in order to overcome these barriers.
- Stakeholders felt that receiving transparent information about the cost-benefits of the different smart technologies available, particularly the no- and low-cost solutions, would really help them to engage vulnerable demographic groups. Providing more details about practical aspects of running a smart energy home, such as smart meter billing and data privacy, was also viewed as a useful engagement tool.
- Participants were split on how NGED could best support getting smart energy advice to vulnerable customers. While some favoured a partner-led communications approach spearheaded by trusted local figures, others encouraged the company to take a more active role. This could take the form of setting up a net zero advice hotline or providing demo smart meters to customers.

Session 4: Winter preparedness

- Stakeholders agreed that innovative, inclusive methods were needed to expand the Priority Services Register (PSR)'s reach, but were divided on whether it would be better to pursue digital solutions or grassroots engagement in order to achieve this in the short term. The increasing vulnerability of the 'just-about-managing', mistrust towards utilities, and unclear communications were identified as obstacles to overcome.
- Participants generally expressed a willingness to act as PSR referral partners for NGED, but some noted that many of their clients are already registered, emphasising the need for proactive engagement of uninformed individuals. Discussions also underscored the necessity of robust, user-friendly referral pathways in order to support the increasingly complex needs of vulnerable customers.
- Views were divided on how NGED could best support vulnerable customers in preparing for winter power cuts. Some championed a data-led approach, through creating a single PSR and using vulnerability data to deliver targeted support for specific groups. Conversely, others wanted to see more practical solutions, such as wider distribution of crisis packs and educational resources.
- There was a broad consensus that the Community Matters Fund has not been sufficiently promoted to demographics that need it the most. Discussions revolved around how best to increase this awareness, focusing in particular on liaising with groups assisting specific societal groups, such as former military personnel and police officers.

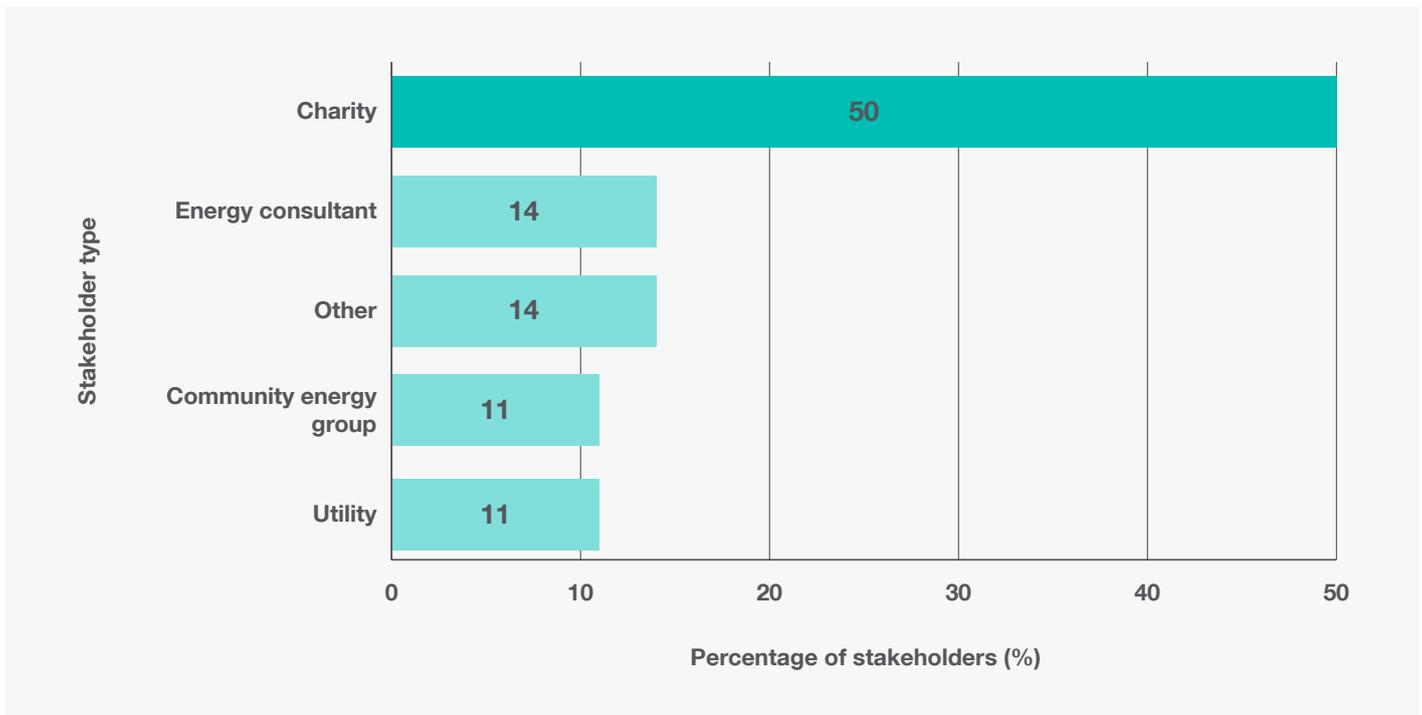
Written feedback

After the workshop, stakeholders were asked to complete a short feedback form. Some of the key findings are shown below. A full breakdown of the feedback can be found in Appendix 2 of this report.

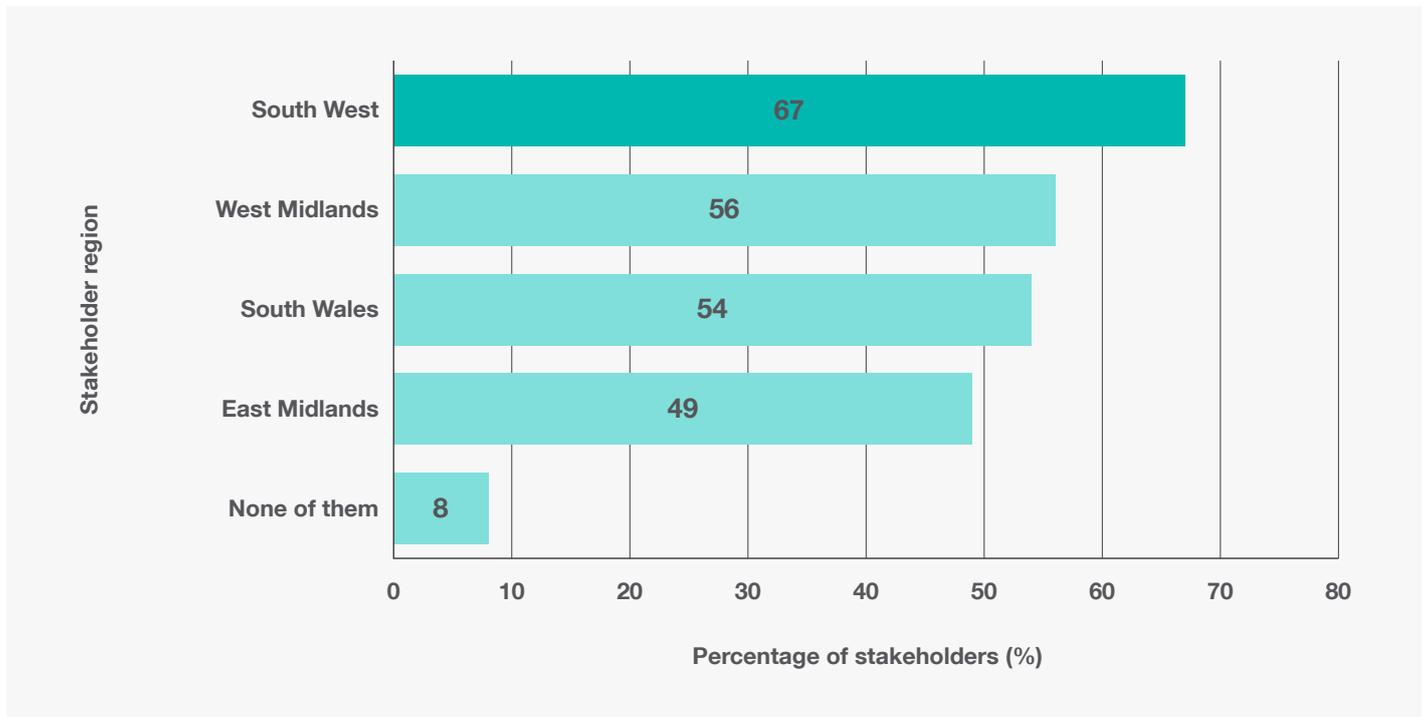
- 95% of attendees who filled out a feedback form told us that they found the workshop either 'very interesting' or 'interesting'.
- 67% 'strongly agreed' and 29% 'agreed' that they had had an opportunity to make points and ask questions.
- 52% 'strongly agreed' and 43% 'agreed' that the topics discussed met their expectations.
- 100% thought EQ Communications' facilitation was either 'very good' or 'good'.

Participants

A total of 67 stakeholders participated in the workshop (online and in person). The most prominently represented stakeholder group was 'charities', which accounted for 50% of attendees. A full list of organisations that attended the workshop can be found in Appendix 1.



The most relevant region to attendees was the South West, as expressed by 67% of Slido voters. However, the West Midlands (56%), South Wales (54%) and the East Midlands (49%) were of importance to participants too.



Session 1: NGED's vulnerable customer strategy



Session 1:

NGED's vulnerable customer strategy

Richard Allcock, Stakeholder Engagement Manager, took attendees through NGED's vulnerable customer strategy, which was built around four key focus areas: tackling fuel poverty, ensuring a just energy transition, increasing the reach of the Priority Services Register (PSR), and building customer resilience to power cuts. Attendees were then invited to discuss their experiences of customer vulnerability over the last 12 months and to assess whether NGED's objectives in this area were still valid.

Introductions and specific areas of interest

All discussions started with introductions. Stakeholders came to the workshop with a diverse range of perspectives, each coloured by their distinct roles within their respective organisations, yet unified by a common concern for the welfare of their local communities and a desire to see fairness in their ability to access the electricity network.

A significant number stated that they had attended the workshop to obtain more information about NGED's plans around emergency preparedness, energy affordability and fuel poverty to inform their own work, as well as to share best practice with others. These areas were viewed as critical to the company's operations with the expected difficult winter ahead, with many calling for immediate action to be taken to mitigate the effects of fuel poverty.

By contrast, others attended with a desire to learn more about longer-term solutions to addressing these same issues, and wanted more information about how NGED intends to overcome the infrastructural and regulatory hurdles to further decarbonising its network. This was regarded as an important piece of the puzzle, as innovation and energy efficiency were seen as potential effective long-term solutions to fuel poverty.

Immediate challenges

Stakeholders spotlighted a plethora of immediate challenges faced by the communities that they represent. The key overarching message emerging from the discussion sessions was that in the short term, individuals and families were mainly concerned about paying their energy bills. However, despite the widespread unease caused by this crisis, the different stakeholder groups put forward slightly different perspectives on the most acute resulting negative effects. The conversations highlighted a landscape of interconnected challenges, with each stakeholder shedding light on a different facet of the struggle, demonstrating the multidimensional nature of the crisis at hand.

The most prominent concerns among stakeholders were rooted in the heightened anxiety triggered among customers about how they would be able to pay their electricity bills this winter, and whether they should use their heating systems as a result. Charities noted that the mental health of these customers and the deteriorating condition of their homes and living conditions were critical challenges to address, particularly in light of the difficulties experienced by NGED in identifying customers with mental health issues. Emergency service representatives echoed these worries, but instead pointed to wider systemic weaknesses as the driving force for increased societal vulnerability, informed by their experiences in assisting individuals who are experiencing long waits to access public services.

Another major crisis reiterated widely across the different discussion groups was the increased demand for support and the stretched resources of assistance organisations. Many attendees drew attention to the broadening demographic of individuals falling into vulnerability, indicating that the current cost of living was now pulling more groups than the traditionally affected ones into vulnerable situations. As a result, this has placed further strain on the limited assistance resources available, resulting in these customers embarking on an urgent quest for alternatives to power their homes from one month to the next. It was remarked that this situation, along with depleted savings and debts, the complex and inaccessible funding for energy-efficiency upgrades, and complicated bills, was creating a sense of woe among communities.

The compounding impact of these challenges on the mental health of customers and partners supporting them was repeatedly emphasised, with debt-related stress being identified as a significant contributor. Energy consultants and fuel-poverty representatives also commented that this problem would be particularly difficult for customers not quite eligible for the existing support schemes available, as well as private renters in poor-quality, energy-inefficient housing. At the same time, charities stressed that there was now a relentless cycle of demand for support without any respite, meaning that they had to firefight and could only provide short-term fixes to these customers.

These themes also came through prominently in stakeholder voting on Slido. When asked to use three words to describe the immediate challenges facing the people that they supported, 'Debt' and 'Poverty' were the most common answers, given by 10 stakeholders each, followed by 'Money' (9), 'Crisis' (5) and 'Confusion' (5). When asked to describe the immediate challenges that they or their organisations faced, the most popular answer given was 'Funding', provided by 11 respondents, followed by 'Capacity' (8), 'Demand' (5), 'Stress' (5) and 'Suppliers' (5). See word clouds on p.14 for more details.

Areas of focus for supporting customers

Attendees predominantly urged NGED to focus on ensuring that there is effective communication about the support available, to provide longer-term funding to its partners, and to develop support strategies that will deliver long-term societal impact, as the key areas of focus. These differing perspectives hinted at an underlying tension between addressing immediate, people-focused interventions and broader, system-level strategic planning.

Effective Communication and Signposting

A range of different approaches to how NGED could more effectively signpost its support were set out during discussions. Many stressed that the company should look to focus on advertising its assistance as sensitively as possible, in light of many people experiencing vulnerability for the first time and feeling embarrassed to ask for help. At the same time, charities were keen to see NGED support its advisers with continuing skills development and regular information about how they could assist their clients against this backdrop of expanding and evolving vulnerability. With this in mind, many participants strongly supported NGED's concept of a one-stop-shop for vulnerable customers and viewed it as fundamental, citing the efficacy of in-person visits to build trust and offer suitable advice. Finally, there were also strong calls for more targeted communications about the support available to hard-to-reach groups in order to ensure that they do not fall through the cracks.

Longer-Term Funding for Partners

Some stakeholders underscored the urgency of stable and long-lasting funding arrangements, noting that they needed funding to last longer than a year in order to alleviate the insecurity that they faced in trying to deliver long-term assistance to their local communities. In the absence of long-term funding, they stressed that they have needed to work smarter in collaboration with NGED in order to deliver their services efficiently. By contrast, while noting that funding was a critical issue, others stressed that it was not their sole concern and pointed to NGED's impactful role in providing frontline resources, such as trained personnel, to support charities. Therefore, many took the view that NGED should double down on using local organisations to disseminate information to communities so that people can obtain help in ways that are most suitable for them.

Longer-Term Support Strategies

On the other hand, while noting the sheer scale of the current challenges, others advocated for strategies designed to deliver long-term societal impact instead

of solely concentrating on immediate fixes to mitigate customer crises. As a result, they were keen to see long-term strategic investments in network infrastructure to help deliver net zero infrastructure, and a communications strategy on the low carbon transition targeted at vulnerable groups. This should emphasise the benefit of low bills to vulnerable customers and will contribute towards achieving a Just Transition.

Key objectives for 2024

Attendees generally took the view that NGED's primary objectives for the forthcoming year should encompass a broad range of community and consumer-focused improvements, with an overarching theme of inclusivity and support. One point of consensus was the importance of a social tariff in response to the alarming trend of individuals disconnecting from their energy supplies. Many feared that this situation would escalate further during the colder months, and therefore encouraged NGED to explore this as a matter of urgency.

Another key objective for 2024 was addressing trust issues among the public towards the company and investing in efforts to cultivate a stronger perception among communities. Several took the view that this was particularly important in relation to the rollout of smart technologies, which are also regarded with suspicion by parts of NGED's customer base. Therefore, several representatives called on the company to undertake sensitive outreach work in its local communities in an effort to get them to embrace these technologies, with a view to ensuring an inclusive transition to smart energy. Building on this idea, utilities companies noted that economically disadvantaged areas were likely to be particularly resistant to these technologies and utilities, and therefore stressed that NGED should leverage credible and trusted voices to disseminate its messages in order to achieve wider uptake.

Another recurring theme was the accessibility of services. Many called on NGED to keep working to make its information and services accessible to all, taking the needs of individuals with low levels of literacy or non-native English speakers strongly into account. They argued that many customers were currently at a disadvantage, which was not only impeding their ability to engage with services but also posing barriers to cooperation.

1. What is your role at your organisation and your reason for attending today?

- “We’re a charity that supports older and vulnerable people so that they can stay independent.” **Charity**
- “I’m an emergency preparedness practitioner and part of a risk management and evacuation team, specifically looking at adverse weather planning requirements.” **Emergency services**
- “I’m from an energy charity and work on energy affordability funding. I’m new to the role, so I’m interested in learning more about NGED’s operations in this area and am keen to put forward what is being said by different energy community groups that we work with.” **Charity**
- “I’m a social obligations lead. We’ve all got the same targets, aims and objectives. I’m here to learn from everyone and share ideas.” **Vulnerable customer representative**
- “I’m from a fuel poverty and energy efficiency charity and want to spotlight where most of the support needs to go into, particularly around support for this winter, social tariffs and home retrofitting.” **Charity**
- “I’m coming from a provider position and am trying to keep prices down for our customers. We’re trying to connect solar panels to domestic and various commercial projects, but it’s just not happening fast enough.” **Domestic customer representative**

2. What are the immediate challenges facing the people and communities you work with?

- “For us, people are worried about putting their heating on because of what they see in the news. Today it’s the storms, tomorrow it’ll be their roofs leaking and tiles falling off. We have issues with getting to people because of hoarding and cluttering, and it’s hard to reach them due to mental health problems.” **Charity**
- “One of the biggest things is within our own trust, we’ve got a lot of people traveling through systems quickly, and they hit several areas all at once due to having waited so long.” **Emergency services**
- “For me it’s about raising awareness of the help that is out there. Many people don’t know what’s out there.” **Charity**
- “We’re seeing a big increase in phone fraud, scams, people phoning up pretending to be banks. Our main issue is the underreporting of crimes.” **Emergency services**
- “At my organisation, the big challenge is the volume of applications for support from us. We need to find a way to cope with the scope of this crisis and meet the needs of consumers contacting us. Internal resources are also a struggle, as a lot of our network is made up of volunteers.” **Charity**
- “The support workload feels quite relentless. There used to be a summer break, but that’s not the case now, meaning that we’re more stretched than ever. As a result, we cannot provide long-term solutions and are just putting sticking plasters on things.” **Charity**
- “A wider range of people are asking for help than before, showing how the problem is spreading beyond traditional groups.” **Freelance researcher**
- “There is a limit to how many vouchers we can give out per year, and people go through them incredibly quickly and are desperately trying to find new ways to get more.” **Charity**
- “We’ve had a lot of debt issues recently, as people have run through their savings.” **Charity**
- “There is actually a lot of funding for retrofitting activities, but getting the money is complicated.” **Charity**
- “Our main pain at the moment is complexity of the issues, especially to do with billing.” **Community energy**
- “We’re seeing more mental health problems arise over debt-related concerns.” **Charity**
- “The challenges include the footfall impact based on our bereavement support, meaning that our resources have been stretched to meet their needs.” **Charity**
- “Ordinary people don’t have enough money coming in to match what is going out. Not everybody is entitled to the benefits and schemes that we offer.” **Energy consultant**
- “Many people, particularly in private rental accommodation, have broken boilers and poor-quality energy-inefficient homes. This combination of energy inefficiency and precarious housing will be a huge problem this winter.” **Fuel poor/vulnerable representative**

- “We need to invest more in overflows and balancing the issue of increasing water bills, which will unfortunately have to happen. We need to reach those that are hard to reach, and those that are new to the water poverty.” **Utility**
- “Superficial training will provide limited help when it comes to mental health. What NGED could do is encourage a wider network of organisations so you have a mental health specialist linked to your service.” **Charity**
- “Identify issues as early as possible and have a robust point of referral.” **Charity**
- “Collaboration is a priority. Vulnerable customers want to know what low carbon looks like and what it means in reality.”
Vulnerable customer representative
- “A lot comes down to funding and support. Services like ours can only do what we are funded to do. There are always more people needing our help than we can help.”
Fuel poor/vulnerable representative
- “As well as funding, we need resources. What has been really powerful to us as a charity is having time. National Grid is providing frontline resources and has provided trained people to give advice to answer the phones.” **Charity**
- “Accessibility. Making information available through local organisations so people can access it in a way that’s suitable to them.” **Charity**
- “NGED has been really good in picking up and resolving the issue from last year, working with schemes and charities. They’ve also done a decent job in increasing PSR awareness, but I would change the model and continue supporting vulnerable customers.” **Charity**

6. What in your view should be NGED’s key objectives for the year ahead?

- “Is there a social tariff that NGED could consider? We’re seeing so many people disconnecting, and that will only accelerate over the winter.” **Charity**
- “The lack of trust is a big issue. NGED should look to work more proactively in fostering this trust, particularly in relation to smart-energy technologies, as it will ensure that no one is left behind in the smart future and that NGED hits its wider goals.” **Charity**
- “Our new activities include reaching communities to discuss eco-friendly energy and other solutions, particularly in areas with high levels of deprivation, like in Scotland and South Wales. When reaching out to customers, we try to use trusted voices. Some people will not trust us, so we need to figure out how to give our knowledge to those who already do. This is something that NGED should be targeting.” **Utility**
- “Most important focus for this particular year would be any activity to improve accessibility of all of our services. It’d be great to make information available to customers, but we need to also consider people who have low literacy or for whom English isn’t their first language. There is nothing in place to support some customers so it’s increasingly hard to work with them. Things need to be accessible to all.” **Charity**

Session 2: NGED's fuel poverty delivery model



Session 2:

NGED's vulnerable customer strategy

Nicki Johnson, Stakeholder Engagement Officer, delivered the second presentation on NGED's fuel poverty delivery model and performance. She began by outlining the company's approach to responding to fuel poverty, with short-, medium- and long-term goals aiming to tackle immediate crises, while also building long-term pathways to breaking the cycle of fuel poverty. She provided an overview of NGED's fuel poverty schemes and the financial savings achieved for customers in 2023. Two of NGED's partners then provided an overview of some of the work they have been delivering in this area: Julia Folland, from Care & Repair Cardiff and the Vale, and Susan Noori, from Coventry Citizen Advice. Nicki Johnson then took attendees through the results of the Centre for Sustainable Energy's (CSE) Horizon Scan, which sought to understand the support landscape and identify a series of recommendations for how NGED can more effectively provide support.

CSE's Horizon Scan project

Stakeholders were generally of the view that the outcomes of the Horizon Scan resonated with their current experiences, but noted that there were subtle differences across NGED's licence area, reflecting the huge geographical area and the diverse customer base that it covers.

Charity representatives in particular stated that the Horizon Scan aligned with the situation in their local communities. Most notably, they expressed concerns about the complexities involved in building efficient referral networks of organisations for providing comprehensive support to individuals. As a result, they suggested that NGED should look to assist with streamlining these referral networks in order to help advisers in disseminating key support information. It was hoped that this would make it possible to address a number of the Horizon Scan's recommendations simultaneously. Concerns were also expressed by community representatives about the increased vulnerabilities experienced among their own workforce, underscoring the pervasive nature of the issues at hand at a grassroots level.

The issues of precarious funding, struggles to keep up with increasing demand, and the 'crisis mode' operational approach chimed with attendees in particular. Many bemoaned the issue of cyclical financing for support initiatives, resulting in precarious short-term interventions that provide short-term fixes rather than long-term transformations. NGED was therefore encouraged to focus on providing high-quality guidance to its support partners, who

could then help break their clients out of long-term fuel poverty cycles and quell the widespread public confusion and fear. There were also calls to increase face-to-face support services as a priority in order to address some of the findings of the Horizon Scan, with several stakeholders remarking that social prescribers and mental health workers would be well placed to deliver this service within their community.

Regional disparities were also highlighted, with consumer bodies pointing to the contrasting challenges faced by urban areas like Exeter, in comparison to coastal regions with seasonal work and younger populations. The inconsistency in the availability of support mechanisms was a point of frustration, with some criticising the transience of assistance programmes, which often disappear, leaving individuals scrambling for alternatives.

Responding to the Horizon Scan recommendations

Stakeholders put forward a wide range of suggestions for how NGED could further respond to the Horizon Scan report's recommendations, with a focus on more integrated referrals and funding frameworks, deeper crisis training for staff, and a more comprehensive use of data and smart technologies in working with vulnerable groups.

More deeply integrated support models were a recurring theme during discussions, with a single pot of funding across Distribution Network Operators (DNOs) and a single point of contact for referrals identified as essential steps forward. Many stakeholders expressed frustrations about the disconnected referral pathway systems, which required vulnerable customers to repeat their stories repeatedly in order to access support. However, they stressed that, in order to streamline these pathways, wider information sharing would be required, which was currently advancing only slowly. A single funding pot was viewed as beneficial, as it would simplify access for advice agencies currently navigating disparate funding streams. Therefore, longer-term funding for these agencies and more training for their advisers so that they could tackle the emerging challenges posed by the current socioeconomic climate for customers were viewed as a must.

The working conditions for specialised advisers were also identified as an area to consider, based on these recommendations. Attendees largely praised NGED's partnership work with local support and advisory groups, particularly due to its potential to offer specialised emergency assistance adapted to the individual needs of each community. However, the pressing issue of low salaries within the sector, the increasingly distressing nature of the calls

received, and the scarcity of expertise to cope with some of the new challenges were raised. NGED was consequently urged to assist by providing clear information to assist these advisers in their work, as well as resilience training.

It was also argued that there was scope to leverage data more effectively and incorporate smart technology more prominently into fuel poverty support work based on these recommendations. In particular, charities pushed for NGED to leverage its demographic data in order to tailor its schemes signposting what steps should be taken during an emergency to the most at-risk groups within the communities that it serves. At the same time, with the sharp increase in requests for smart-energy advice, it was thought that there was space for providing support to vulnerable local communities in understanding and minimising the costs associated with smart technologies, as a building block for the Just Transition. By contrast, several other stakeholders felt that digital exclusion was a notable barrier to overcome, and suggested that a strategic approach informed by gap analysis using mapping tools could be invaluable in reaching digitally excluded vulnerable customers.

Partnership work to address fuel poverty

There was a consensus that more work needed to be done to increase awareness of support services, especially among first responders. It was acknowledged that these public services could act as crucial signposts to direct vulnerable individuals to the necessary assistance, provided they were informed about the resources available. However, despite this consensus, participants were split around whether it would be better to adopt immediate or long-term solutions as a priority. This illustrated the complexity of the issue and the need for a collaborative approach tailored to both immediate and long-term needs.

While taking a one-stop-shop approach had been popular in tackling customer vulnerability more generally, there was more of an appetite to see NGED focus on developing a wider network of referral and support partners in order to dispense basic advice around fuel poverty more effectively.

Long-term measures underpinned by a spirit of inclusivity were pinpointed as effective potential solutions to overcoming fuel poverty in NGED communities, with a particular focus on a Just Transition towards the Smart Energy Future. With this in mind, some stakeholders suggested monitoring demographic data around the installation of heat pumps and EV chargers. This would facilitate targeted support for underrepresented groups to ensure that they were not left behind in this technological revolution. Others took the view that it would be beneficial to work collaboratively with local authorities on a comprehensive retrofit programme on older

homes, using their reach into communities to find the most at-need homes for these solutions.

At the same time, others put forward more immediate solutions to meet the needs of customers in crisis. While some were more in favour of a tiered charging system for distributing bill costs more equitably based on usage and need, mirroring the approach used by the water industry, others once again pinpointed social tariffs as their preferred approach to addressing fuel poverty. In the more immediate term, local crisis funding was considered the essential channel for offering rapid solutions to urgent customer needs, such as boiler repairs or heating-system inefficiencies. Finally, others believed that NGED should provide funding and training for grassroots groups to ensure that they can maximise the limited assistance funding available and overcome the communications gaps between different projects.

Fuel poverty best practices

Attendees shared a number of best practices that they felt could assist NGED in reaching out to new vulnerable customers, with some focused on face-to-face interactions that delivered a more integrated service, and others championing online digital platforms to target younger demographics.

In-person engagement schemes were commonly suggested by attendees, with many examples put forward. These included local energy champions and engagement stands at community roadshows, which all set out to extend outreach into communities. There was also a keen focus on building collaborative partnerships to deliver multifaceted in-person support services. For example, it was thought that it was worth exploring the possibility of working with nurses and advisers going into the homes of potential vulnerable customers and looking for possible wider triggers of vulnerability, such as living conditions, finances and heating. It was felt that this type of approach should be considered, as it takes a more holistic approach to vulnerability. Another example of potential good practice to follow from health services was the 'Warm Home Prescription' scheme. This NHS initiative assesses the vulnerabilities of individuals whose health conditions may be exacerbated by cold homes, and subsequently provides direct financial support to them so that they can pay their bills to heat their homes properly.

The digital expansion of support content, especially aimed at younger demographics increasingly affected by debt and fuel poverty, was underlined as a significant advancement that NGED should consider adopting. This online content strategy had been adapted by a charity to address the evolving needs of those seeking help. This mirrored the sentiments of an energy consultant who pointed out the potential of social media platforms like Instagram and the planned outreach through TikTok and Snapchat to engage the 18-30 age bracket on fuel poverty and environmental concerns.

1. Do the findings of our 'Horizon Scan' fit with your current experiences?

- “One thing that springs to mind for me is the challenge of building referral networks across different organisations. We want to deliver a holistic package, but there is only so much information that can be given to an adviser in one go. Finding ways to streamline these pathways could enable you to hit a number of these recommendations in one go.” **Charity**
- “We have employees on our own register that are vulnerable. Even though they are working for us, they fall in that bracket.” **Community energy**
- “We see this in the data and case studies. Everything here is what we’re seeing.” **Charity**
- “How do NGED customers become aware of this? It’s only people who have friends and family who can refer them who will get access.” **Fuel poor/vulnerable representative**
- “It depends on who you talk to in referral organisations. You have to make sure people on the teams understand how things join up, especially the staff at lower levels.” **Community energy**
- “There need to be people on the ground to deliver in-person support. This could be social prescribers and mental-health workers.” **Charity**
- “Exeter is a big urban area, but we have the coast with young people struggling and seasonal work.” **Consumer body**
- “The inconsistency of sources for help. One might be open for a while, but then it closes and you have to scabble around looking for something else.” **Fuel poor/vulnerable representative**
- “All of our measures have been short term. You invest the money and then you lose funding because it’s not a new initiative.” **Charity**
- “I find there’s quite a bit of confusion out there. Very often, people are just scared.” **Energy consultant**
- “It’s often about quality of advice rather than quantity. You need to be able to give that extra time.” **Energy consultant**

2. Do you have any suggestions for how NGED (or our partners) can act on the report’s recommendations?

- “The one that jumps out to me is the ‘single point of contact’ approach, that’s been a strength of National Grid for a number of years. We need to look at how multiple things can be put under one roof. Retrofitting is a bit of a black hole in policy terms, and there could be a clear benefit of time into a project like that if National Grid worked on that.” **Emergency services**
- “We get frustrated when referral-pathway systems don’t talk to each other. This means that customers have to tell the same story time and time again in order to access support. We need to find ways to share information more easily to prevent this.” **Charity**
- “Advice agencies spend so much time piecing together funding packages from different pockets of money. While I understand that NGED is keen to have branded funding programmes and projects, is there a way for DSOs to come together and provide pooled funding projects? That would make things easier for us.” **Freelance researcher**
- “I think that funding longevity and adviser upskilling needs to come through more strongly in these recommendations.” **Charity**
- “I really like the local aspect in the recommendations, as it’s best to be able to refer someone with specific local knowledge. This would be helpful when providing targeted advice to clients. We could refer people to more specialist, local organisations.” **Fuel poor/vulnerable representative**
- “The recommendations are great, particularly those to the PSR. We shouldn’t just build our awareness of emergency situations, but we need to know exactly what our customers should do. We should collect data and use them to develop targeted schemes, based on housing needs and demographic indicators.” **Charity**
- “This issue of low salaries in the sector is intensifying, and it’s to do with the high demand for retrofitting and low supply of experts in the area. Our phone calls are getting more and more distressing, so resilience training for our staff is very much needed.” **Fuel poor/vulnerable representative**

- “Smart energy advice is interesting. I would like to know if there is more support for it. We’ve been trying to address these questions ourselves based on customer feedback concerning smart meters and what costs they incur. There is now an interest in how costs can be minimised.” **Charity**
 - “What NGED are doing now is similar to what we’re doing with vulnerable people and PSR gaps. There is a high concentration of customers that are digitally excluded. We’re interested in using a mapping tool that informs our strategy with the gap.” **Vulnerable customer representative**
 - “I think there’s something to be said in building those referral pathways. There’s a lot of information out there which is quite confusing. Ecoflex schemes with local authorities are very confusing. The way things are implemented is becoming quite complex and they are not achieving their aims.” **Charity**
 - “This is all about firefighting. I think working with Ofgem and the government needs to be looked at more closely, as well as issues with regulations and how we create regional partnerships.” **Charity**
 - “Partnership work, food and fuel vouchers on top of the day-to-day advice. At Citizens Advice, the one thing we do offer which is quite unique is the holistic service. There’s an average of seven different issues in each case.” **Charity**
- ### 3. What more can we do in partnership with others (such as utilities, charities and local authorities) to help meet the needs of people living in crisis?
- “I think the NHS is more aware of what there is out there than the fire service and the police. You need to make people aware that the vulnerable register exists. It’s natural that a person would call the police if they’re on that register, and they could then signpost them towards us and other services.” **Charity**
 - “We get a lot of contact from referral partners, but the issue is that everything is underfunded, so a one-stop-shop for assisting vulnerable customers is not necessarily the best approach for disseminating advice. Instead, you should look to create a dense partnership network and use the Community Matters Fund to get basic advice out into communities.” **Charity**
 - “You need to ensure that funding for programmes is long lasting in order to ensure that fuel-poverty support work can always run continuously.” **Charity**
 - “I feel that it would be useful to monitor who installs heat pumps and EV chargers in order to get wider demographic context around the rollout of these services. This would help you to ensure that nobody is left behind in the smart energy future by targeting support at underrepresented groups.” **Freelance researcher**
 - “The energy sector should have a plan that makes it possible to quickly lower prices per unit for very vulnerable people.” **Community energy**
 - “The major urgent issue is a massive retrofit programme that would be easily accessible. Unless we have a massive national drop in prices, which won’t happen, we need local services providing retrofitting. It should be local authorities working on this as they have a big reach.” **Charity**
 - “All of us here are part of the social tariff scheme, but in my opinion, it might not bring the fuel poverty back to the levels from before this crisis. The tariff project needs to be done in tandem with other systems.” **Charity**
 - “I think that when it comes to the energy tariff, it needs to be done in tiers, like it is in the case of water, not have one unit price for everyone.” **Utility**
 - “If you get small amounts of funding, you must have a good upskilling and capacity-building programme so groups who receive funding can apply for more funding and build on what they’ve achieved.” **Charity**
 - “The Community Matters Fund is a grassroots issue. Do these grassroots groups get training and is there any capacity building in this area? There is not much communication between the different projects. I wasn’t aware of this fund until far later.” **Charity**
 - “Local crisis funding. When somebody is in desperate need (their boiler or hobs have broken down, or they have no heating or hot water), we have to give them tools for a temporary solution and a quick answer. Of course, referring them to Citizen Advice is an option, but it’s not enough.” **Charity**
 - “From a client’s basic point of view, I would say energy efficient equipment is a good avenue. The main starting point to improving things in this area is identifying the contact places and disseminating the correct information to the general public so that they can consider them.” **Vulnerable customer representative**

4. Can you share any best practice undertaken by your organisation?

- “You should be looking to provide a long-term continuous support programme and stick with vulnerable customers once you have provided the initial support. At our organisation, we receive vulnerable women and continue with them after their baby is born.” **Charity**
- “We have really expanded our online content in order to reflect the changing demographics seeking support, particularly as more and more young people are getting into debt and fuel poverty.” **Charity**
- “I would like to highlight the Warms Home Prescription, an NHS scheme which involves directly paying the fuel bills of vulnerable customers with lung conditions following referrals from the health and care sector.” **Freelance researcher**
- “Our team cares. It’s not just a ticking box exercise for them or a job you can forget about once your shift is finished. For example, we went to a customer’s house on Boxing Day, as they were needing fuel.” **Community energy**
- “We have a database of people who speak Slovak, Czech, Polish, Ukrainian and other languages, so we know who to send to help a specific person.” **Community energy**
- “The best practice is the holistic service built out of collaborative partnerships which can upskill people and look at a person, their house, their financial situation, their heating system and more.” **Community energy**
- “Energy champions are a good idea as they can share knowledge with other groups. We would look at roadshows and doorstep events for promoting these services. Some groups think that using Facebook to spread the word is enough, but it is not.” **Charity**
- “We recently rolled out additional advice support and training and are looking to expand special services. This includes training nurses to go into homes and using fuel poverty advisers providing near round-the-clock support for additional advice.” **Charity**
- “We’re looking at how to best reach the 18-30 age bracket and are exploring social media channels, particularly Instagram, to get an uplift in investment. We’re focusing our message around decarbonised heating as a means of saving the planet. We haven’t tried TikTok and Snapchat yet, but intend to do so in future.” **Energy consultant**
- “In East Devon, they have a financial resilience team as part of their private housing scheme, who refer clients to us. We then do home visits to look at billing and grant opportunities. We are often the first person to see someone who is vulnerable, and there might be other ways we can help them.” **Consumer body**
- “With the funding that we receive, we go into communities and run sessions targeted at marginalised and underserved groups who struggle to access traditional advice. For example, we teach them how to read bills. This kind of thing is a great starting point.” **Charity**

Session 3: Smart energy showcase



Session 3:

Smart energy showcase

Richard Allcock introduced the third session on the smart energy transition. To begin, he outlined NGED's commitments towards delivering a fair and inclusive smart energy transition, including offering 600,000 PSR customers a bespoke 'Smart Energy Action Plan' each year. As part of work towards making this commitment a reality, he noted that the company had been working with the Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE) on piloting the rollout of Smart Energy Action Plans. Karn Shah from the CSE then provided an overview of these pilot schemes.

Discussing smart energy with customers

Stakeholders were asked what their experience has been of discussing smart energy solutions with customers. Broadly speaking, these discussions revealed a multi-faceted picture, with economic and educational factors coming particularly to the fore.

The high costs involved in retrofitting homes and installing heat pumps came through as a major concern in interactions with customers. Attendees noted an increased interest in heat pumps among some demographics, but pointed out that many customers simply do not currently have the financial resources to purchase them at present. As a result, low-cost solutions, such as smart meters and smart plugs, were generally currently being favoured. Despite the popularity of no-cost solutions, a number of participants explained that transferring customers over to time-of-use tariffs had been a struggle due to the unclear public information about how they work and how much individuals are charged when using them. As a result, this was posing an obstacle to the Just Transition, as many vulnerable customers have little mental bandwidth and cannot navigate through the complex information currently published. This had led to them being locked out of one of the most accessible routes to reducing energy bills. Therefore, many frontline advisers in attendance stated that they would appreciate a simple information pack from NGED which they could use to sell these no-cost and low-cost solutions to the customers in question.

Lack of trust towards energy companies and new technologies, particularly among older customers and social housing tenants, was another key theme of discussions, with many giving examples of negative experiences of the smart-meter rollout, in particular. This situation had fostered a deeper sense of reluctance towards new technologies as a result. In order to overcome the public scepticism towards electricity companies, NGED was strongly urged to increase customer engagement with smart

technologies in order to bust myths about these new devices and combat fears of surveillance and forced tariff changes.

Barriers to customers adopting smart energy and potential solutions

Barriers to Adopting Smart Energy

Attendees outlined a large number of obstacles holding vulnerable demographics back from embracing smart technologies, ranging from customer unease to the prevalence of misinformation, illustrating the complex environment that NGED is navigating.

Stakeholder discussions revealed a pervasive sense of public anxiety and disempowerment towards smart-energy technologies, noting that feelings of vulnerability and surveillance were common among the individuals and groups that they represented. These feelings have been exacerbated by the suspicion generated by the issues of the disjointed rollout of smart meters and the cognitive load placed on these consumers by home energy management systems. Others noted that the conflicting messages around time-of-use tariffs have muddied the waters further, with utility companies encouraging customers to use larger appliances at night to save money and firefighters warning against this on safety grounds. As a result, vulnerable customers have been left feeling confused and apprehensive.

Language barriers and digital exclusion were also pinpointed as factors holding back the rollout of smart technology, indicating a complex challenge that extended beyond older customers. As a result, the effectiveness of NGED's communication methods was scrutinised, with stakeholders noting that interactions over the phone with vulnerable customers were less effective than visual, hands-on support during home visits. At the same time, others stressed that the dialogue around new technologies should be simplified for vulnerable customers, with energy efficiency placed at the heart of any messaging, and that this should be supported by regulatory support to aid the transition towards low carbon technologies for all.

Potential Solutions

Despite this challenging picture, participants put forward a number of solutions to overcome this sense of disempowerment and fear among customers. There were particularly strong calls for NGED to undertake more proactive long-term frontline engagement and educational work targeted at vulnerable groups to increase public confidence in these technologies and debunk false information disseminated about them. It was felt that NGED should look to partner with trusted local organisations for this engagement

and educational work, as this would make the target audiences feel less wary about the topic from the outset. At the same time, others took the view that the company should explore more accessible communication strategies for specific demographics, such as the elderly, using user-friendly channels like pamphlets and information forums. Finally, suggestions were also raised about looking into working with housing constructors around installing more automated technologies into homes, meaning that less active decision making would be required by residents, and making smart-energy home management less onerous as a result.

Support for engaging customers on smart technologies

Beyond the barrier of price, the lack of clear information about the practical implications of smart energy among local communities emerged as the major hurdle hindering stakeholders from engaging with vulnerable demographics. There was a consensus on promoting low-cost or no-cost measures as a pivotal immediate step, as they could deliver immediate benefits to vulnerable customers, but the point was also made that any energy efficiency strategies would need to be accessible and practical for these groups. Consequently, many emphasised a clear need for more transparent information from NGED about the cost benefits of the different solutions available, thereby empowering customers by enabling them to make educated decisions. Echoing this desire to see greater transparency, other stakeholders, particularly charities, championed the idea of tailored information and advice on smart energy devices for different groups, reflecting their differing needs. They argued that any such information and advice should look to tackle the dichotomy of short-term affordability and long-term benefits, with a view to finding durable solutions for each customer.

In addition to broader information campaigns, attendees also strongly took the view that NGED should look to provide more information about specific practical aspects of the transition to this technology, such as billing processes for smart meters and the repayment process for customers who overpay initially when using smart readers. Others also touched upon customer concerns about data privacy, and a number of others worried about whether heat pumps could be feasibly installed in many homes, highlighting the lack of space available in many houses and flats. Coupled with the huge amount of disruption caused by putting them in, questions were raised about whether some people would decide that heat pumps are not worth the hassle. As a result, NGED was strongly encouraged to provide more public information about these practical aspects in order to alleviate concerns among potential would-be adopters of smart technologies.

No clear consensus was reached on who should lead on engaging with customers in this area. However,

many attendees were supportive of local partners standing at the forefront of engagement efforts due to their trusted status within local communities. On the other hand, others noted that many of the barriers faced by advisers are symptomatic of broader structural issues, such as poor-quality housing and a lack of household resources for purchasing these types of solutions. Therefore, some asserted that NGED should take a proactive umbrella role in advocating for these technologies and capturing learnings in order to support a smarter energy transition across a broad range of groups. It was hoped that this could help to address these broader structural issues currently hindering this transition.

Support for advising customers

Despite the overarching agreement on the need for improved communication and support, divergences emerged on how this should be implemented in practice, with various stakeholder groups envisioning different pathways to reassuring vulnerable customers about smart energy and encouraging them to embrace it.

Attendees largely agreed that NGED should use trusted partners for disseminating net zero advice, citing public mistrust toward utility companies as a major concern. On this basis, charity representatives urged NGED to provide additional training for their staffing on the signs and triggers of fuel poverty, putting them in a better position to identify vulnerabilities and provide advice during home visits. Others also thought that the company could provide large-scale housing developers, such as Taylor Wimpey, with smart-energy information packages for them to distribute in their new homes, ensuring that residents receive essential information from the start. At the same time, some argued that NGED should simply signpost customers towards authoritative independent resources for advice on this topic, as customers would be more likely to accept advice given this way.

Conversely, others took the view that the company should take a more direct role in disseminating advice. Some were in favour of simpler approaches, such as a more expansive communications strategy on smart energy, or a specific net zero query hotline, in order to alleviate customer distrust and demystify the technologies behind it. However, others took the view that more tangible solutions were required in order to illustrate the benefits of smart energy, such as creating demo smart-reader units to enable customers to familiarise themselves with the technology. Another suggestion involved NGED partnering on Open Home projects to provide an 'unvarnished' view of smart technologies, thereby fostering local trust. It was stressed, however, that this initiative should not exclusively benefit middle-class demographics, but also reach less affluent communities, possibly through collaboration with tenant groups.

1. What are your experiences of discussing these topics with customers?

- “The high cost of heat pumps is a common issue when going through retro-fit schemes, but there is a lot of interest around the low-cost measures, particularly smart meters. We get a lot of calls about time-of-use tariffs, but it’s not easy to get people onto them. Clients don’t tend to like the capabilities sections because they can be quite anxiety inducing.” **Charity**
- “When you’re dealing with a crisis, these things can be hard to talk about. We’re hoping that the next iteration of the Welsh Government scheme for installing solar panels can do more. Customers generally understand how the digital kit works, but they refuse smart meters because they don’t want something giving scary updates on how much everything is costing them.” **Charity**
- “Efficient energy use, such as smart metering for electric vehicle charging, is hindered by distributor malpractices and quota-driven meter replacements. Simultaneously, initiatives like heat pump promotion increase electricity reliance, and are causing financial worry. As a result of this information overload, customers are mentally switched off.” **Emergency services**
- “We get a lot of resistance towards smart readers, especially from older customers who know someone who had a bad experience. People who use social housing also don’t like the idea, as they are moving often, and it costs £65 to get a smart meter replacement.” **Community energy**
- “Many PSR customers are older and not tech savvy or capable. A lot of Smart Energy Action Plans (SMEAPs) involves myth busting about smart meters, but also the actions of energy suppliers around smart meters. People think the energy supplier will spy on them and force them onto a prepayment meter. There are also customers who love smart meters.” **Charity**
- “Digital exclusion tends to relate to older people, but there are also language barriers. Wariness of energy suppliers is more universal.” **Charity**
- “There’s been a huge failure on the smart-meter rollout. We’re now backpedalling to explain it’s all about infrastructure upgrades. We can’t move forward as quickly as hoped.” **Community energy**
- “We are finding this interaction with vulnerable customers challenging over the phone, and have had more success with customers face-to-face on home visits. It’s more visual to them and there’s more hands-on support we can help them with. This is especially if the customers are not tech smart.” **Energy consultant**

- “We’re familiar with dealing with fuel poverty, but these technologies are new for both us and our vulnerable clients. Some of our exposure to LCT and solar power, for example, has led us to begin to address the question of how we are going to get out to vulnerable customers to adopt these technologies.”

Vulnerable customer representative

- “The frontline-facing teams need to be developed. The talk is about dealing with the LCTs and new technologies, but we want to simplify the talk and make it about energy efficiency. Our regulators will need to implement and support this transition over the longer term concerning LCTs.” **Utility**

2. What barriers are you facing and what can NGED do to help you?

- “Lots of people don’t feel empowered by having this technology in their homes and instead feel vulnerable and monitored. You need to find a way to overcome this barrier through communications campaigns.” **Charity**
- “I think that, in the bigger picture, the advice around shifting demand is slightly muddled. Whereas time-of-use tariffs encourage customers to use big appliances overnight, the fire service urges you to do the exact opposite. How do you square that circle?” **Charity**
- “This approach involves quite intensive home energy management. Is there a way that some of this could be automated? Most people don’t have the headspace for this.” **Freelance researcher**
- “In September, EDF and BG told me not to switch anyone until the end of October as they were having issues with the software used to switch their smart readers. The companies couldn’t connect the readers. So the companies themselves are having issues. It’s worth remembering that.” **Community energy**
- “I’ve heard experts talking about the need of having pumps and solar panels, but the building practice does not follow that advice. In my area, there are 200 homes being built and not one of them has a pump or solar panels. These things need to be included in building plans, not just be added afterwards. That way, people will get used to pumps and solar panels.” **Community energy**
- “More promotion is important. We need more frontline work to build confidence and inform people about the benefits of us coming to their home, providing a face-to-face engagement platform. NGED needs to get the message out, potentially through organising events.” **Energy consultant**

- “NGED needs to adopt more user-friendly communications channels to reach out to older populations and make smart energy appear realistic and practical, such as pamphlets and information forums. The changes all sound beneficial but it’s overwhelming. We have to make it clear it’s the best thing for people now through careful educational pieces.” **Charity**
 - “I agree that educating people will be the way forward in order to bust the myths and defeat the scare stories surrounding smart technologies. It won’t be an overnight process.”
Vulnerable customer representative
 - “One issue that we face is how to cascade the information downwards. We could work with NGED and approach this problem of communication collaboratively to work out how to educate people, whether that’s via pamphlets, forums, roundtables, or whatever.” **Charity**
 - “Possibly graphics and presenting information that has lots of detail. If there is uncertainty in Government policy, people are going to hang back to wait and see what happens.” **Consumer body**
 - “People really don’t like data harvesting, which is always a problem. Although they’ll make the grid a lot better, there’s still a lot of resistance against smart meters.” **Energy consultant**
- ### 3. What would help you to better engage customers on these topics?
- “I think the main thing is the disruption caused by installing heat pumps and the amount of space that they take up in your homes, particularly if you’re looking at a mass rollout in social housing. Also, how you define vulnerability is one of the biggest questions. It used to just relate to over 65s, but now it’s changing hugely.”
Emergency services
 - “It’s the cost vs benefit of each possible action, people need that to be made clearer to them so they can make informed choices.”
Emergency services
 - “The biggest thing for me is tailoring advice to client needs. Higher-cost and longer-term offers are completely out of reach for the customers coming forward to us, so we need both help with getting the quick wins through the short-term services, while helping them to get funding for the higher-cost products that will deliver long-term benefits.” **Charity**
 - “For me, promoting the easy low-/no-cost measures is the key one, as they can provide instant improvements for customers.” **Charity**
- “We’ve heard lots of issues about massive bills and smart meters, but no one talked about how easy it is to pay customers back if they’ve overpaid. You need to make it relevant to customers. We always talk about the fear, but now it’s the safest time to get a smart reader: no supplier can just switch you onto another tariff unannounced. It’s illegal.” **Utility**
 - “I always explain how important it is to have the usage data, but not just for the customers. It also benefits energy companies, and people need to know that too. There is no point lying about that.”
Community energy
 - “Part of our work with NGED is giving out crisis packs and flexible funds to people, which include items like hoodies and radiator reflective panels. Through the funding we received from National Grid, we’ve given out 4,000 packs.” **Charity**
 - “I wonder how much of crisis kits is mandated by Ofgem and how much should be on DNO remits. I’m not sure if it should be the DNO’s position to fund heated blankets.”
Fuel poor/vulnerable representative
 - “There are also other, more traditional fixes we should consider. Recently we visited a home where the door bar got detached and there was a massive gap underneath the door which was letting in a lot of draft, meaning that the customer just needed a new door.” **Fuel poor/vulnerable representative**
 - “New cheaper tariffs at specific times will make a difference. It will maybe make people get smart meters.” **Fuel poor/vulnerable representative**
 - “All the barriers faced by advisers trying to inform people about technology come down to the broken system. It’s a structural issue. Learnings should be captured, and NGED should advocate. Advisers alone can’t carry the smart transition.” **Charity**
 - “This technology could be fantastic, but housing stock is so poor. People on good incomes who can afford these technologies have very low energy bills, but they are not the ones who need the support.”
Charity
- ### 4. What would help you to be able to better support and advise customers on these topics?
- “Maybe providing more training on it for people like us, so that our customers can have more confidence in us when we go out to people’s houses.” **Charity**
 - “Could the information not be shared with developers? You’ve got massive companies like Wimpey, and they could give a package on this with the new homes when people get them.” **Charity**

- “People do their own research, and you giving them a nudge towards the information might cause them to look into it further and therefore realise that there is something behind what we’re telling them.” **Emergency services**
- “There was a general sense that there’s only so far that we can go as an organisation, as we’re a link for organisations that are not trusted by their customers and help to facilitate the rollout of technologies that are mistrusted too. NGED should look at a wider communications piece to try to remove these concerns among customers.” **Charity**
- “With some of these trust issues at play, could NGED look to support home visits from more trusted local organisations? That way triggers of fuel poverty could be identified and energy advice could be disseminated.” **Freelance researcher**
- “We don’t have a dedicated national energy line for net zero, and that could really help. Just having an easy information point that can spell out what net zero is and what the work to hit it would involve would be a great starting point.” **Charity**
- “I think that you should look for geographical gaps in knowledge and do analysis about what types of knowledge each area lacks, as there are definitely knowledge deserts. This would then give you scope for how and where you should target any information campaigns.” **Charity**
- “I think that NGED should consider partnering on Open Home projects, including these types of smart technologies, so that people can get an honest view of the ups and downs of these projects and get energy advice. This will help to build local trust.” **Charity**
- “I generally support the idea of Open Home projects, but NGED must ensure that it doesn’t just target middle-class people, and opens these technologies up to less well-off groups. Working with tenant groups to set up these kinds of schemes would be really helpful.” **Freelance researcher**
- “People need to know why smart readers are good. Having a demo smart-reader unit would be crucial. A picture just won’t do it, as people need to be able to actually see it and touch it. Some think it has a camera and spies on you like Alexa.” **Community energy**
- “NGED could maybe help with energy health checks and map out steps towards the premium end. They could identify where the client is and how far up the process we could take them. There should also be more publicity about the success stories, because there aren’t many of those around.” **Fuel poor/vulnerable representative**
- “Making everything very simple and very accessible, and getting information out to the right people in a way that does not require a large amount of research or upfront costs.” **Charity**

Session 4: Winter preparedness



Session 4:

Winter preparedness

Richard Allcock gave the final presentation of the workshop on NGED's preparedness for supporting vulnerable customers during power cuts this winter. After being taken through the success stories of NGED's winter 2022-2023 winter-preparedness campaign, attendees were informed about how the company intended to build on it for the winter ahead. Measures to achieve this included expanding the PSR reach and updating vulnerable customers' PSR records. The vital work of the PSR referral network in getting to hard-to-reach customers was also highlighted as a key pillar to this work, with efforts constantly made to expand it.

Collaboration to expand the PSR's reach

Stakeholders unanimously agreed that innovative and inclusive approaches were required in order to expand the PSR's reach and ensure that the services underpinning it were fit for purpose at a time when more and more people are becoming vulnerable. However, splits emerged around how to achieve this, with some favouring Government and digital interventions and others advocating more grassroots frontline engagement.

Many argued that there was scope for greater cross-sector collaboration on digital initiatives to bring the PSR to more vulnerable customers. One popular suggestion among stakeholders was collaborating with other utilities to create a single PSR, which would make it easier for at-risk demographics to access services. Taking steps to achieve this was seen as a quick win, and NGED was encouraged to explore this. Others took the view that the company should be working with local authorities on leveraging their datasets to identify and understand the scale of vulnerabilities in particular areas. As a result, it was hoped that it could produce targeted demographic-specific communications campaigns to reach out to further vulnerable customers. Another potential digital partnership was raised in the form of the BadgerNet maternity system, which was described as an efficient and proven way of signing up large numbers of pregnant women and new mothers to the PSR.

Despite the huge potential of digital approaches discussed by stakeholders, others were concerned that the increasing prevalence of digital exclusion as a vulnerability factor could stop the message getting out to some vulnerable customers. Therefore, they called on NGED to factor this into its approach to expanding the PSR's reach, and to use grassroots face-to-face engagement to seek out hard-to-reach groups. Attendees suggested using focal community points

such as schools, post offices and community centres, as well as local support groups, as effective partners for signposting the PSR to local people who needed this support.

While no new vulnerabilities were put forward for NGED to consider, there was a feeling that the needs of 'just-about-managing' customers were becoming more acute, as more and more of them drifted closer to crisis. Therefore, several attendees recommended proactive work to target this group and get support for them earlier, particularly in view of the difficult economic climate.

Mistrust of energy companies was cited as a key factor stopping vulnerable customers from hearing about the PSR. The point was made that this suspicion put some demographics, particularly rural people, off from wanting to listen to information about this support, meaning that they remained unaware of the benefits that it could bring. At the same time, others criticised NGED's wider communications strategy for the PSR, and felt that it did not sufficiently clarify the different eligible groups, meaning that lots of vulnerable people would be unaware that support is currently available to them.

Referral partnerships

Attendees were generally happy to act as referral partners to help NGED to sign customers up to the PSR. However, there was scepticism among some groups about how much further their efforts could go, with a number of charities noting that many of their clients are already on it. Therefore, it was felt that referral partnerships should aim to be more proactive in engaging individuals who are not as confident or informed about seeking out support.

With this in mind, it is somewhat unsurprising that more 'handholding' and more robust referral pathways were key themes during discussions on how to move forward in this area. With vulnerable customer needs becoming greater and more complex, delivering seamless support to them was viewed as a must. By making the pathways smoother and easier for vulnerable customers to navigate, it was hoped that more people would come forward to request assistance.

Once again, participants emphasised the importance of having a sense of locality embedded into referral partnerships. Therefore, there was a feeling that referral partnership frameworks should be anchored in localised interpersonal interactions using community hubs and local support networks. It was hoped that this approach would help to overcome the digital barriers experienced by harnessing the power of the physical presence of local representatives in an age of growing digital reluctance or inaccessibility.

Support from NGED to help customers prepare for winter power cuts

When discussing how NGED could support stakeholders' work with customers ahead of the coming winter to prepare them for potential power cuts, the key themes were data management and consolidation, customer education and emergency resource provisions.

While there was a general consensus that NGED should leverage data more proactively to help prepare customers for potential power cuts this winter, splits emerged on how it should approach this. Many championed more data sharing about vulnerable customers between different utility groups, and argued that work towards creating a unified PSR could streamline data sharing in consumers' interests. By having all of the information to hand in one place during a power cut, it was thought by some that NGED could improve its customer support to those who need it the most. At a less immediate level, others thought that a single PSR would help to close information gaps about vulnerable demographics in communities and ensure that these customers' needs are fully captured. As a result, NGED could make efforts to increase their resilience in the event of a potential power cut.

By contrast, others took the view that it would be better for the company to focus on getting a nuanced understanding of its vulnerable-customer data and then delve into the intricacies of vulnerability in different geographical areas in order to deliver tailored power-cut support for different groups. With this in mind, charities brought to the fore the specific needs of families with young children, noting that few had come forward to ask for this support. It was thought that if NGED performed a comprehensive gap analysis on its customer basis, they could help to get them signed up for emergency power-cut support.

There was also broad agreement that NGED should share more resources to empower vulnerable customers to withstand potential blackouts, in the form of practical support and educational literature. Stakeholders were happy with the existing leaflets on power-cut preparations, but also underscored the need for wider information distribution and additional educational pieces in order to ensure that relevant information was accessible and actionable before any outages occurred. With this in mind, others pinpointed the barriers posed by language differences, urging the company to ensure that all of its documents, including the PSR sign-up form, are in multiple languages in order to foster greater inclusivity. NGED's emergency crisis packs containing items such as torches and gloves were praised, and attendees urged the company to double down its efforts to distribute them to vulnerable demographics as far as possible.

Community Matters Fund

Attendees largely felt that the Community Matters Fund was still quite obscure to its target audience, and focused their discussions on how to increase this awareness. Conversations were rooted in the practicalities of outreach efforts to different vulnerable groups, with several favouring partnering with established organisations such as The Royal British Legion, Soldiers', Sailors' & Airmen's Families Association (SSAFA), and National Association of Retired Police Officers (NARPO). These were considered key potential partners due to their robust connections with ex-service personnel and retirees, which are key target demographics for the fund. There was also a palpable concern surrounding the challenges of engaging with insular communities on this fund, particularly the travelling communities, with some underscoring the need to use specialised liaison officers to bridge the trust gap.

1. How can we work with you (and collaboratively with others), to expand our Priority Services Register, so that we can reach more customers in vulnerable situations?

- “From my work with the hospitals in the West Midlands area, we’re on the BadgerNet system for pregnant women, where we just upload things onto that system and every woman gets the information digitally. Through this, we were able to get 500 people onto the PSR, and need to keep repeating this process as vulnerabilities arise among pregnant women and new mums.”
Charity
- “Partnering on communications campaigns for schools would be a great approach that goes outside the box. If you educate kids, they go home and spread the message to their parents.” **Charity**
- “More needs to be done around data sharing and creating a single PSR, like the water industry does. That would stop you needing to register again and again for the different services.” **Charity**
- “I would support putting adverts inside of buses rather than just outside of them. Lots of people that may need your support would be using the bus, so you have a large potential audience there.”
Freelance researcher
- “Another type of vulnerability is also digital exclusion, which we wouldn’t have been talking about five years ago. I think people who are digitally excluded are less likely to know they are actually going to be cut off.”
Fuel poor/vulnerable representative
- “Look at the demographics of each locality. This is why our dataset is so powerful, as we can see the scale of what’s happening.” **Charity**
- “The migrant population is one of our biggest-growing areas where English is not the first language. We’re treading water with older people, but the migrant population in our area is a ballooning demand we’re not meeting.”
Charity
- “The just-about-managing group are so close to crisis. How do we target and educate this group and get them support earlier?”
Community energy
- “A PSR barrier we’ve seen in rural Wales is that people are reluctant to sign up to the PSR due to distrust in energy suppliers. There’s a need to differentiate the DNO from the supplier. The poor quality of suppliers means vulnerable people are missing out. It all comes down to advocacy and better messaging.” **Charity**

- “Just before winter or before relevant TV programmes, the government could launch a media campaign promoting the PSR. They could automatically register customers for PSR with the data they have.”

Fuel poor/vulnerable representative

- “It’s about going into local groups and communities to build further awareness. It’s about using the available means of communication with older generations. This could include leaving messages on the community notice board or at post offices. It’s about reaching people on their home ground.”
Utility
- “It’s about reaching out to the support networks, for example the support networks of a person who has chosen to die at home. Are these people being supported by someone at home as a third person and can they be linked to the register? The carer role needs to be taken into consideration as a conduit for communication.” **Charity**
- “Different forms and different publicity targeted at different groups. The handout that I have here is targeted at disabled people, so people think if they’re not disabled they aren’t eligible. One group we often point to who need to be brought into the conversation is households with kids under five, because they often don’t relate to the publicity.”
Energy consultant

2. Do you want to be a referral partner, helping us sign up customers up to the PSR?

- “We have had difficulties with reaching people on the PSR, as most of our customers are already on it. In order to get people onto it, we generally stress the protections that the PSR can deliver and the resulting peace of mind that is provided.” **Charity**
- “Normally the people who are contacted already know about us and feel confident enough to pick up the phone. We need to reach out beyond them and get to people who don’t know about the PSR and don’t feel confident enough to get in touch.”
Charity
- “You also have an issue with getting people to trust energy companies, even when they’re trying to help. The most success we have had in signing people up has been at community events with stalls. This quick face-to-face interaction has drawn people to us and helped us sign lots of people up to the PSR.”
Charity

- “I think that we need to bear in mind how the physical presence of local authorities is changing in the context of people’s nervousness around or lack of access to digital services. Lots of people are now using libraries as almost local public community hubs, so librarians are considering getting training in signposting other services. Maybe NGED could help them to signpost access to the PSR?” **Charity**
 - “I think that using digital screens in GP surgeries will help. For our Warm Front project, we managed to increase our take-up by doing that.” **Freelance researcher**
 - “Childcare settings are another place where you could consider targeted messaging about the PSR. Many people don’t realise that under-fives are seen as vulnerable and only think that it’s elderly people that need support.” **Charity**
 - “A lot more handholding is needed now than before due to the scope of customer needs. As a result, we have invested in referral pathways to ensure that no one falls through the gaps.” **Charity**
 - “We want to do more together. We could join up together with more charities, like with Marie Curie.” **Utility**
 - “Make sure our local authorities are informed so that they can get people registered for the support they need.” **Vulnerable customer representative**
- 3. Is there anything else NGED could be doing to support your work with customers ahead of this coming winter to prepare them for potential power outages?**
- “Our biggest challenge is the lack of contact details for customers. Now that we share PSR data with National Grid, we have better data.” **Utility**
 - “Why isn’t there just one PSR? There shouldn’t be an issue with data sharing if it’s in the consumer’s interest.” **Fuel poor/vulnerable representative**
 - “Get energy suppliers to share data with you. This is where the consumers have their details entered.” **Fuel poor/vulnerable representative**
 - “Does NGED know where the gaps are? Does it know about vulnerabilities not taken into account on the PSR?” **Community energy**
- “If there’s a massive gap for families with young children, we might fund charities that target these people.” **Charity**
 - “Databases could tell NGED who should be on the PSR. Do the gap analysis and target the customers.” **Fuel poor/vulnerable representative**
 - “There are leaflets about preparing for a power cut and we have them and can give them out.” **Fuel poor/vulnerable representative**
 - “It is about education and making sure the information is easily accessible. People don’t look into what to do until it happens.” **Charity**
 - “I have things in place because I have a son with disabilities, such as torches and charged power banks. Distributing support packs with these kinds of items to a larger number of vulnerable people would really help them.” **Charity**
 - “NGED should assist people with going through the form and produce the form in more than just English to overcome language barriers.” **Charity**
 - “The people who are signed up do appreciate the service, but it’s just getting it out to all of the groups who are eligible.” **Energy consultant**
 - “Energy providers are good messengers, but they need to make sure that they provide the information to us so that we can signpost any relevant customers to the support available. This is something that we and NGED could work together on.” **Energy consultant**
- 4. Had you heard of the Community Matters Fund before – what more can NGED do to promote it?**
- “The Royal British Legion and SSAFA are two big ones for us. The RBL works with a lot of ex-servicemen and SSAFA backs them up. I could also press NARPO, those are the types of groups that are there to work with retired people and could help you get the information out there.” **Emergency services**
 - “The travelling community are very hard to reach. We’ve got a liaison officer for that. They’re a very tight-knit community that are very suspicious of the police or anyone in authority. They’re going onto winter sites now which can be subject to winter shortages. We are fortunate that the guy we’ve got has been working with them for 14 years and can go onto any site in Warwickshire.” **Emergency services**

Appendix 1

Attendees

A total of 67 stakeholders attended the workshop, from 42 organisations. The organisations represented are shown below:

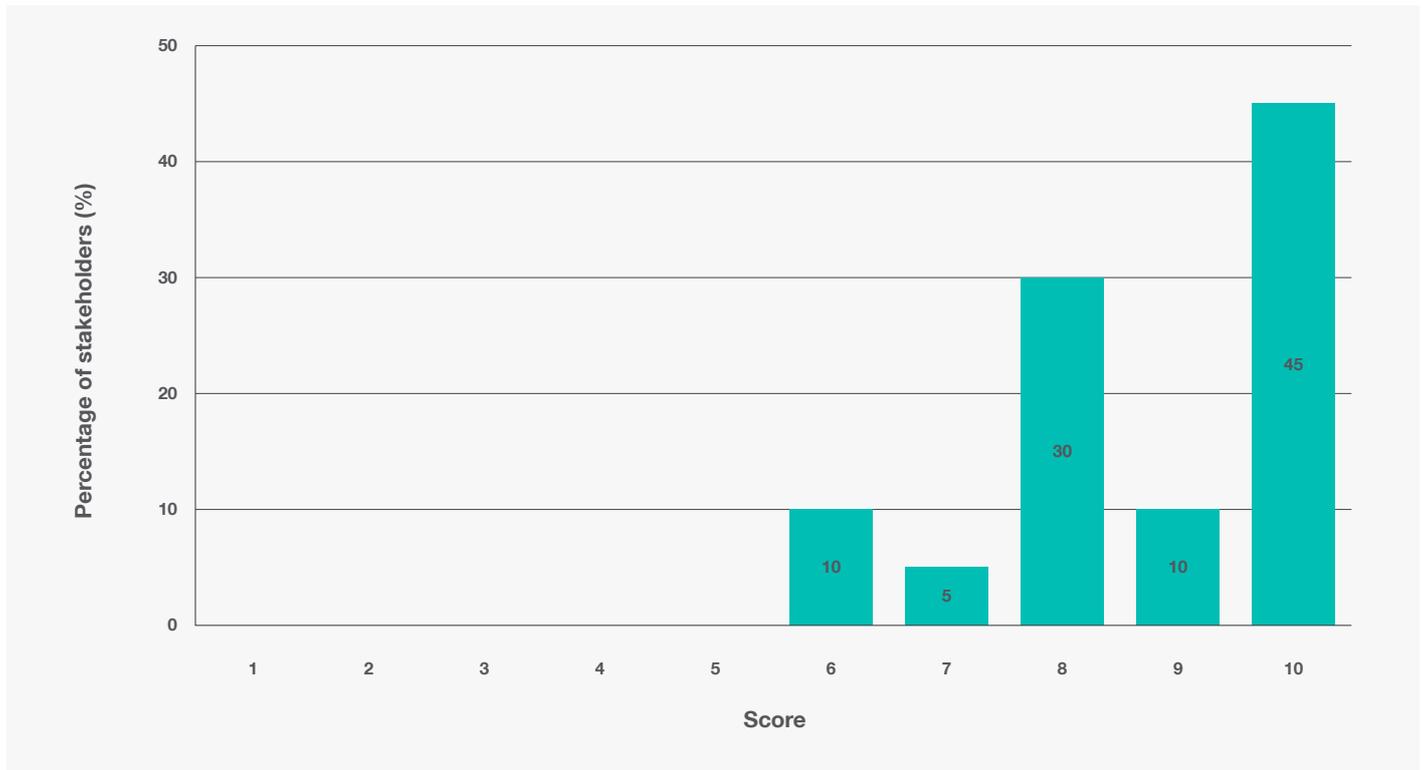
361 Energy
Affordable Warmth Solutions CIC
Air Liquide Healthcare
Birmingham Community Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust
Bridgend Council
British Red Cross
Bromsgrove Council
CAB
Care & Repair Cardiff and the Vale
Carers Wales
Centre for Sustainable Energy
Citizens Advice
Cornelly Development Trust
Coventry Citizens Advice
Cwm Arian Renewable Energy
Diabetes UK SW & SC
Dudley Metropolitan Borough
Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water
ECOE – Exeter Community Energy
Energy Networks Association
Energy Saving Trust
Hope 4 U Limited
Marches Energy Agency
Marie Curie
Melin Homes
National Energy Action
Nottingham Energy Partnership
OVO
Peak Empower
Plymouth Energy Community
Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks
Severn Wye Energy Agency
Sia Partners
South East Wales Energy Agency
SP Energy Networks
SSEN
Tamworth Wellbeing and Cancer Support Centre
The Centre for Sustainable Energy
Utility Warehouse
Warwickshire Police
Wessex Water
YES Energy Solutions

Appendix 2

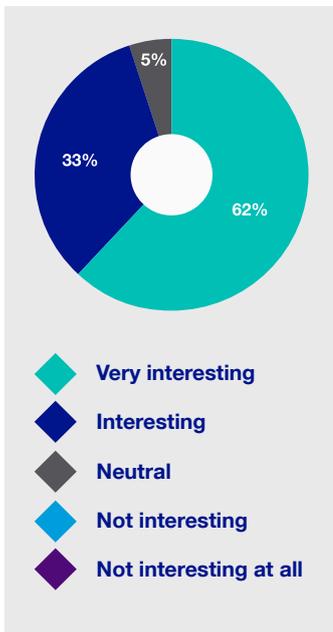
Workshop feedback

After the workshop, stakeholders were asked to complete a short feedback form. The feedback was as follows:

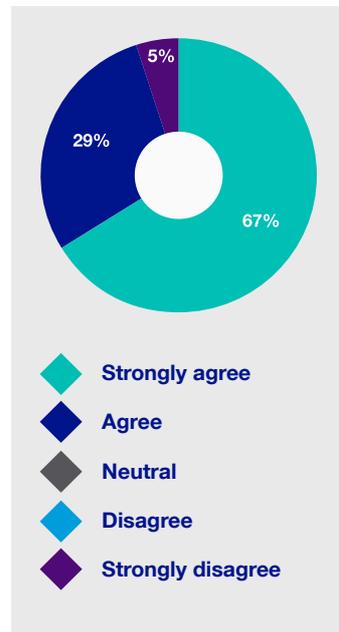
1. Overall, how satisfied were you with today’s workshop? Where 10 is ‘very satisfied’.



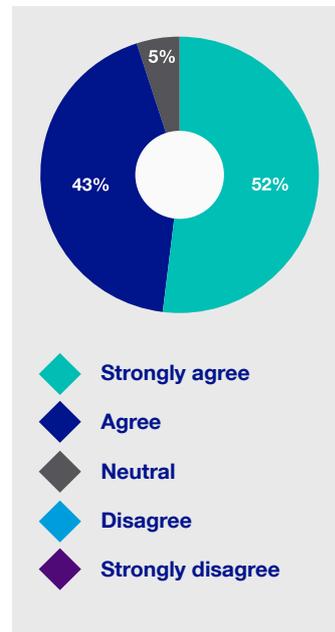
2. Overall, did you find this workshop to be:



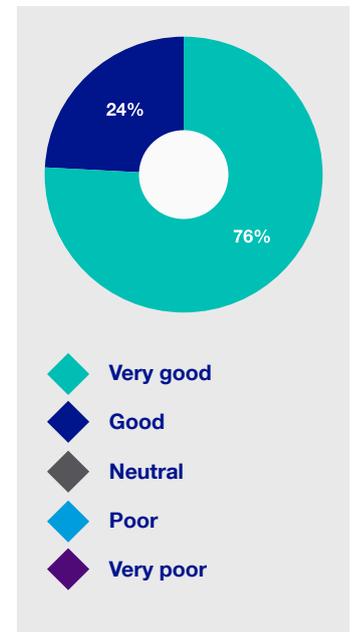
3. Did you feel that you had the opportunity to make your points and ask questions?



4. Did we cover the right topics for you on the day?



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



Question 2 comments

- “I found the presentations very interesting and relevant to my work.”
- “The discussions were really great across the morning.”

Question 3 comments

- “The discussions were well managed and relevant.”
- “Having slightly longer for the discussion session may have resulted in more idea-generating/sharing.”
- “More time would have been nice, but I found it really interesting and useful!”
- “It was very engaging and I felt included throughout.”

Question 4 comments

- “Yes, the topics were very much on the agenda right now.”
- “It was what I expected and a great opportunity to share best practice.”

Question 5 comments

- “There were a couple of technical bits, but everything was handled well.”
- “The facilitated sessions were expertly steered.”
- “Strong content delivered clearly and concisely.”

What could we do to improve future events like the one you have attended today?

- “More opportunities for one-on-one discussion with NGED representatives.”
- “Make them in-person only in order to get more people in the room.”

National Grid plc
Avonbank
Feeder Rd
Bristol BS2 0TB
United Kingdom

nationalgrid.com