

Spotlight Report 2023/24

**An independent report written by the
National Grid Electricity Distribution Customer Panel**

1. Introduction

The Customer Panel (The Panel) is a group of knowledgeable and interested individuals who meet regularly to support National Grid Electricity Distribution (NGED). To ensure the widest participation for the 2023/2024 year we have, once again, provided a mix of in-person and remote meetings. We have also provided a number of topic-specific surgeries which have enabled a more detailed analysis of specific themes or projects. These surgeries have proven especially useful in the past to facilitate analysis of the minutia of a policy or process and have enabled the panel to provide the most detailed feedback.

The Panel itself has been in place for over 15 years and currently has a pool of almost 30 permanent, expert members. During the year, different Panel members attended each meeting or surgery, but all members received the relevant slide pack(s) and were encouraged to comment or provide ideas and feedback remotely. Panel members often also attend other NGED stakeholder events which enables them to bring a fuller perspective to the meetings.

Objectives

Our objectives as a Panel are under constant review were updated this year to:

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

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

Make up

The Panel continues to be made up of interested and knowledgeable individuals from many varied organisations, many of whom have direct contact with customers on a daily basis; some of whom have operational experience and others with a more strategic focus. This enables members to act as informed, and sometimes opinionated, 'critical friends' to NGED. However, we know we need to keep our knowledge and experience relevant to the changing needs of a DSO. This year we have welcomed four new members to the panel and sadly said goodbye to some old faces. Both the Panel and NGED would like to pass on our thanks to all those who have supported us in the past.

We would always welcome interest from sectors not currently covered by The Panel. Particularly we'd be keen to see some representation from those with experience in future energy scenarios, health or leisure or representing MPs or central Government, for example.

Whilst NGED strives “to maintain a workplace that values diversity and wellbeing by accepting and respecting individual differences such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical abilities, marital status, employment status, religion or belief”, this is also the ethos of the Panel.

Although membership of the current panel is considered to be reasonably representative of the wider customer base, we would welcome more members from more diverse backgrounds (representing the communities NGED serves) or with different perspectives, values and experiences to bring to the table.

The following sectors are currently represented:

- Community Energy Groups
- Connections
- Network security
- Emergency resilience
- Utilities/energy industry
- Parish Council/Local Authority/LEP
- Major Energy Users
- Innovation/environment
- Business & domestic customers
- Fuel poverty/vulnerable
- Customer service/consumer interest
- Education/academics
- Distributed Generation



2. Executive summary

The past 12 months has been a time of great change for NGED which has understandably led the panel to a more strategic focus than in previous years. Although we haven't lost our drive to get into the detail of policies and processes, we've also been cognisant of the structural changes within NGED as a business and also the changing landscape of electricity distribution in the UK.

Following the 2021 announcement that WPD would become part of National Grid Group, and following the name change to National Grid Electricity Distribution in 2022, 2023 was primarily a year of reorganisation; an assessment of current and future priorities and development of an operational structure to achieve the goals of ED2 was required.

The panel has continued to offer opinion and advice as these plans have developed and were particularly pleased to be hosted by Cordi O'Hara on 20th October 2023 following her appointment as President earlier in the year.

Surgeries and the buddying system, developed over the last few years, have continued and these are now considered to be business as usual rather than the innovative ideas which they started with. This year has also seen the advent of a specific reporting mechanism for panel members interactions with NGED, more on that later.

Focus areas this year included

- Extensive discussions on future energy use including connections, flexibility and impacts on vulnerable customers
- Smart Energy Action Plans including ongoing development and wider roll out
- Additional support for the Community Matters Fund and Energy Affordability Fund
- Ongoing analysis of the winter preparedness campaign
- Continuation of the 'buddying' system to provide one to one support to NGED staff by Panel members with specific and relevant expertise, including additional offers of support outside of this formal process
- Development of the 'interactions with NGED' system

As in previous years, The Panel continues to set the agenda for meetings and request attendance by relevant NGED staff. We maintain a 12 month plan which provides an early indication of which topics are planned to be covered. This provides the dual advantage of enabling Panel members to see far in advance which meetings they are likely to want to attend (and potentially move around other commitments to enable attendance), but also provides NGED with advance notice of which staff will be required for which meeting. The plan is dynamic and must change with the circumstances.

"It has been another extremely busy year for the NGED Customer Panel and once again I am extremely grateful to members who give up their valuable time to contribute. For example, members have recently had an input into new customer leaflets, partnership funding and our winter preparedness communication campaign. Their expert advice and opinion, and dedicated representation of our customers, enables us to better support customers and continue to improve."

Nicki Johnson, Social Obligations Manager

3. 2023/24 - A year in focus

Funding

Energy Affordability Fund

As the fund entered its 6th Round, The Panel was again asked to review progress. We had already heard that the funding window had been increased to a 12 month period (rather than the previous six) which is something we had long advocated. This seemed to make a substantive difference to the quality of applications, which are designed to support the delivery of energy advice initiatives. The Panel heard about some excellent innovative projects which had previously been funded, discussed many of the current applications and made recommendations for tracking outcomes. The Panel continues to endorse the funding as, not only a way to support those struggling with their fuel bills, but also to develop innovative ideas which can later be rolled out more widely.

National Grid Energy Support Fund

National Grid (Group) sought feedback from the Customer Panel as they continued to look for new ways to continue to support vulnerable customers through a fund specifically for beneficiary organisations which could be used to increase the number of support staff giving advice on phonelines, providing fuel vouchers and improving the energy efficiency of homes at no cost to householders. In 2023, The Panel met to discuss results of the first tranche of funding and to discuss additional funding for those organisations. Members were delighted with the results so far and endorsed the additional funding, whilst also recommending an additional top-up for the Community Matters Fund. Specific advice was given by The Panel including offers of specific connections with individual Panel members to ensure that links with Gas and Water were also considered.

Focussed Support

Surgeries

Our topic-specific surgeries continue to provide NGED with in-depth support. These enable a true deep-dive analysis of the detail of a specific topic, but they also allow time to discuss future strategic direction. Unlike the main Panel meetings, they tend to be attended by a smaller group of individuals who have a particular interest or knowledge of the subject. Discussions tend to be very focussed and this year covered;

- **Social Value Strategy** – Building on the work NGED have been doing to measure the social value of some of their initiatives, they had mobilised a small team within National Grid to review how they could improve social value (as a group) over the course of the next few years with two objectives in mind. Firstly to improve the social value measurement of current investments and secondly to shift community pillar Responsible Business Charter (RBC) metrics from outputs to outcomes. The Panel was treated to an early draft of proposals for us to comment on. Whilst we provided recommendations these were limited to minor tweaks and in general The Panel welcomed the changes proposed.
- **Smart Energy Action Plans (SMEAPS)** – Having been aware of this initiative since its inception, The Panel has always wholeheartedly supported this programme. We heard how great progress has been made with call scripts and documentation, much of this following our previous SMEAP surgery. Particular focus was directed to training for call handlers, with detailed comments and advice provided by The Panel. Concerns were raised about a

perceived lack of options for those in fuel poverty, however it was also noted that poverty is only one indicator of vulnerability. Discussions took in issues around listed buildings, landlord and tenant relationships, rural poverty and much more. Another individual Panel member offered to provide some support with accessibility of information based on their previous experience.

- **PSR Digital Innovation** – The Panel was particularly pleased to be involved at the earliest opportunity with a proposal for a new PSR Digital Team. We heard how small scale trials had been conducted and discussed results of those in some detail. Questions included the options for customers where English is a second language, proposed hours of operation, options for transcripts, etc. Positive comments were received from every Panel member present and the group was very impressed with the results, endorsing the proposal to introduce a bespoke team looking after PSR customers on a ‘digital journey’. We look forward to hearing how this team grows in the future.

“The Panel’s feedback on our Plans helped us make key improvements in the quality of the written Plans, and first-hand feedback from members representing customers in vulnerable situations allows us to keep improving our offering. Plans now benefit from a clearer call to action, and customers are presented with a hierarchy of smart energy offers that may benefit them – starting with the no or low-cost options, going to more expensive, longer-term solutions. Information about smart energy offers – what they are, their risks, benefits, costs, and who they may be suitable for – is provided in a clearer, easier to understand format. All these changes have improved the accessibility of our written advice, which in turn has increased the impact of this important work.”

Karn Shah, Centre for Sustainable Energy

Buddying

Whilst the main Buddying system has continued for another year a particular feature of the last 12 months has been the willingness of individual Panel members to share expertise and experience in a more *ad hoc* way. Offers of sharing research, providing one to one advice on specific proposals or even just a ‘I’m happy to stay on a little longer to go into more detail if you like’, have all played a major role this year. Whilst a main function of The Panel is clearly to provide this additional knowledge and advice, this year appears to have really brought that to the fore. In particular links with other utilities and the clear overlaps in customers in need has been very evident.

Interactions with NGED

This year saw the development of a new initiative within The Panel. By far the majority of Panel members are also NGED customers and where members have joined the PSR, experienced an outage, had a new connection request or other interaction with NGED, these may previously have been just a comment at the end of a meeting. However, it was quickly realised that this provided a perfect opportunity for NGED to get direct feedback on policies, processes and staff engagement etc. A form was quickly developed and a number of members who had already mentioned dealings with NGED were asked to complete them. Initial interactions included unexplained outages at a local solar farm, a short discussion with an NGED employee repairing a cable near a member’s home and an issue with fencing of a local substation. The form provides an opportunity for The Panel member to discuss the interaction, to explain what went well, what the challenges are and also, very importantly, to suggest future improvements.

Although in its early days this feedback loop is already being seen as a great addition to the workings of The Panel and a perfect way to provide NGED with information ‘from the coal face’.

Winter preparedness campaign

Having been instrumental in assessing the Winter Preparedness Communication campaign last year it was particularly welcome to discuss the full results with NGED. We could assess what had worked well and what could be improved or added in the future.

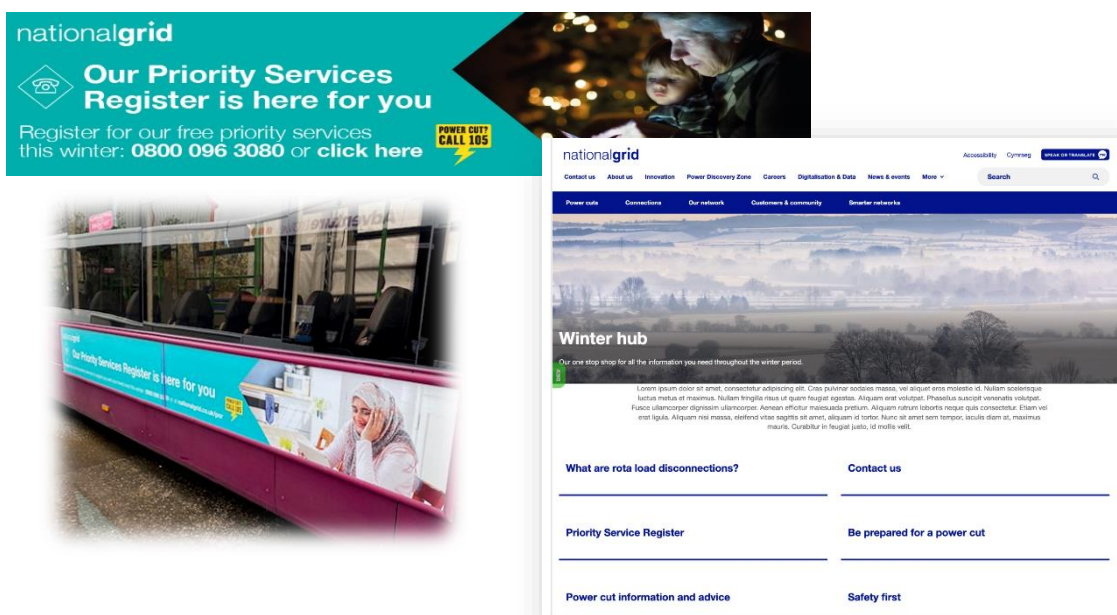
This year’s campaign was going to be a much expanded version of the preceding year. Previously, there had been a concerned focus on the potential for rota disconnections. Fortunately, this was seen as much less likely for the winter of 2023/24 and therefore the communications strategy could concentrate more on what to do in a power cut and eliciting sign-ups to the PSR.

Once again, The Panel were able to provide helpful critique, but more importantly many ideas for both different media and different messaging.

We conducted a full review of all the materials, listened to proposed audio messaging and made suggestions for both ‘getting the message out’ and ensuring that NGED had the right messaging. Additionally some members also reviewed the winter hub part of the website.

“Once again, Panel feedback helped us shape our largest ever winter preparedness campaign. Members provided frank and clear feedback ensuring our messages to customers were clear and informative, without causing any unnecessary panic when heading into the winter months. We adopted multiple suggestions from members, including the use of QR codes, allowing us to improve the reach and impact of materials published through a variety of media, including radio, bus, digital, social media and print advertising.”

Emma Vincent, Head of Brand and Marketing



4. Meeting the new President

In October 2023, The Panel was very pleased to welcome the new NGED president Cordi O'Hara. Cordi introduced herself and provided an overview of her 27 years in the Energy industry. She explained the challenges facing NGED over the next few years, specifically regarding net zero, but also encompassing availability of staffing resource, the changing political landscape and much more.

Panel Members had amassed a long list of questions for Cordi, which were provided in advance, thus enabling her to ensure responses were included in her presentation. Having said that, The Panel, with its remit to act as critical friend, also quizzed Cordi on those answers.

Questions included subjects as diverse as connections delays, regional systems planning, shareholder dividends, potential take up of EVs, future use of demand flexibility services, DNOs and wider social value.

A large section of the meeting was set aside to discuss future restructuring to ensure that NGED is fit for a net zero future. Of particular note was The Panel's delight to hear of the appointment of a new Customer Excellence Director.

With a new president and new structure in place, The Panel is looking forward to a very productive 2024/25.

Feedback

We welcome all feedback and would be delighted to hear from potential new members. We would also welcome any feedback on the spotlight report and more widely in how you feel we could help to support NGED in the future. If you have any comments, suggestions or feedback please email Nicki Johnson, Social Obligations Manager on njohnson@nationalgrid.co.uk.

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