

Social Workshop Report



13th February 2019

together
we are
the **network**

Thank you



Thank you again to those of you who joined us for our social workshop.

Tom, Jill and I all had a fantastic day. It was a great experience to spend time looking to the future both with partners that we've developed relationships with over many years and those we were meeting for the first time.



We were particularly struck by the maturity of the discussions we were able to have on the day; testament to the experience of partners across our network whose working lives are dedicated to supporting customers who are in most need of help.

We've spent significant time as a team and a business, reflecting on what you told us during the workshop. Your views are, without a doubt, proving to be a guiding force in the development of our refreshed Vulnerability Strategy. It's also helping us generate ideas of things we can be doing right now, to improve the way we support communities across the North.

I'd love to hear about what you think of the event and our suggestions for next steps. This is just the start of the conversation. Equally, if you were not able to join us on the day and would like to share your views it would be great to hear from you.

Best wishes

Eileen Brown
Director of Customer Experience
Northern Gas Networks

Tom Bell
Head of Social Strategy
Northern Gas Networks

Jill Walker
Emergency Operations Manager
Northern Gas Networks

Purpose of the workshop

As we prepare for our next regulatory period, Northern Gas Networks is taking the opportunity to refresh its strategic approach to our social commitments and supporting customers in need.

This workshop formed part of a series of stakeholder events looking at different aspects of our business including our environmental performance, safety and reliability, innovation and the future of gas. Reports on each of these workshops can be found at together.northerngasnetworks.co.uk

Our objectives for this session were to:

- Ensure social strategic priorities reflect stakeholder preferences and priorities
- Develop our plans for customers in most need of support

In support of this, we met with stakeholders from local community, third sector and charity organisations operating across the north to discuss three key questions:

- **Who** are the customers most in need of additional support and how can NGN best provide this for them?
- What more can NGN do to support individuals and communities living in **fuel poverty**, other than new connections?
- What can NGN do to increase awareness of **Carbon Monoxide** gas safety?

"It has both increased my own knowledge and understanding as well as having opportunity to feed in to NGN business plans and future work."

"Profound insight into NGN innovation challenges and supply chain."

"networking opportunity and discussion around relevant topics to my work"

19

delegates – spanning national policy organisations to SME supply chain businesses

9.1

overall satisfaction with the event (out of 10)

Acting on your feedback – our commitments

The feedback you gave us during this workshop is helping to shape the way we work both now and in the future:



What we'll do now:

- We will refresh our Vulnerability Strategy, directly reflecting the feedback that you provided on the day and based upon the 'awareness-accessibility-action' framework that you recommended.
- We took on board your views that cultural issues may produce specific challenges for our customers when an engineer wants to visit a home. To understand this further, we've undertaken some further research to better understand communities across our network and will run focus groups with our diverse customer groups to help identify where we need to flex our customer journey.
- You were clear that our engineers could play an important role in helping to reduce fuel poverty by providing energy efficiency advice. We have now completed a small pilot of this approach and, following your feedback and analysis of the results, we will scale this up this year to reach more customers.
- We heard loud and clear your ongoing support for our Community Partnering Fund and commit to continue funding this scheme in both our current regulatory period and during RII02.

What we'll do during RII02 (from 2021):

The feedback we received during this workshop is driving the development of our business plan for our next regulatory period, 2021 – 2016. Our new Vulnerability Strategy will provide the overarching strategy for our plan. And particularly, we are addressing a number of pieces of feedback you provided on the day, including:

- Establishing a formal competency framework for vulnerability skills and training; responding to your feedback that soft skills training often isn't prioritised when workload is high for many organisations. Our competency framework will help us move from a 'nice to have' to an essential capability for our colleagues.
- Proposing a hardship fund; you told us that there a small number of customers who fall through the gaps of existing funding but who require help and support. We will propose a new hardship fund that will target these customers; providing help when it's most needed.

Next steps:

We want to make sure that we continue to get it right and, to do that, we want to keep the conversation going.

Here's three opportunities to work more with us over the coming months. However, we welcome your ideas.

Tell us your views on our new business plan: During July 2019, we'll be publishing the key proposals for our RII02 business plan based on the feedback that you've given us so far. We'd love to hear your thoughts on whether we've got it right. The consultation will be available on together.northerngasnetworks.co.uk

Feedback on this session: Have further thoughts on some of the issues raised during this session? Or a great idea of things we should be doing in response to your feedback? We'd love to know. Please contact us directly on stakeholder@northerngas.co.uk

Help us further develop our Vulnerability Strategy:

We are currently drafting our new strategy based upon the feedback you provided during this session. We will circulate our draft strategy shortly and would love to hear your thoughts.

Who are the customers most in need of additional support and how can NGN best provide this for them?

You told us we should support:

- Customers that are fuel poor;
- Customers in need of support; and
- **All customers** on the issues of CO awareness

Thinking about fuel poverty

You felt that common definitions of fuel poverty are flawed and can't be tailored for individual circumstances.

"If you're in food poverty you'll be in fuel poverty too, but when you're visiting a food bank you're in crisis so probably not in the right mindset to benefit from energy advice."



You identified diverse customer groups who are commonly in fuel poverty, including customers or individuals who are:

- On a low income (including those affected by Universal Credit changes)
- Single parents
- Students
- Living with health needs that require higher heat
- Living in hard-to-heat homes with poor energy efficiency rating (particularly older properties, homes without cavity wall insulation).
- Off-gas and/or off-grid or with unreliable electricity connections.
- In debt including through gambling.
- Unsure if they can afford heating.

- On prepayment cards as these tariffs are still more expensive than Direct Debit, are not smoothed seasonally and there is still standing charge even if heating turned off.
- On prepayment cards in debt unwilling to put money onto their prepayment card as 10% of it will go towards their debt and believe they can't switch supplier with a debt on account.
- In private rented accommodation and afraid that asking landlord to improve energy efficiency might lead to eviction.

100% of you felt that our Vulnerability Strategy should support both customers connected to the gas network and residents that are 'off grid'

Comparing definitions of fuel poverty

Definition

Energy costs are more than 10% of household income

Your views

- Required energy cost is hard/expensive to calculate so expenditure is used but this often isn't the same: the customer may be keeping bills below this level by not heating their home adequately.
- Required energy cost depends on circumstances: e.g. are householders out at work/school, do they have health problems?

Low-income high-energy bills

- Income may not be low but customers have high debt interest repayments
- This model is intended for identifying fuel poverty statistical purposes not for use at individual household level.

"NGN should help in any situation where life or property is at risk: everything falls into that"

Thinking about broader vulnerability

You identified diverse customer groups who are in need of support:

- Physical disabilities, mental health problems, learning disabilities, dependencies and their carers.
- Illiterate and/or innumerate
- Don't speak English
- Digitally isolated
- Socially isolated
- Unfamiliar with the system after recently moving to the UK
- Who don't realise they need help or don't like to admit it, or have adopted coping strategies.
- Moving in and out of vulnerability is a vulnerability in itself

"A lot of people don't like to feel they're vulnerable, so we don't actually use that word."

"People who know they're vulnerable will come to you, but the people who don't know, that's where you have to go and reach out to them."

"Humanise decisions instead of ticking boxes as circumstances fluctuate."

You emphasised that the most effective way of identifying and supporting these customer groups was through partners whom customers trust, as such organisations can have relationships and use the right language in a way that NGN as a 'corporate' can't.

You also felt it is important for Frontline NGN staff to be trained in and empowered to identify and act for these customers and present consistent messages.

"Cultural issues may prevent NGN staff from entering a property unless a man is at home."

"Corporates like NGN have a process, a certain language, with formalities, which vulnerable people simply do not understand."

"We can define what vulnerability means, but then getting to those people is a key challenge."

"Corporates like NGN have a process, a certain language, with formalities, which vulnerable people simply do not understand."

"We can define what vulnerability means, but then getting to those people is a key challenge."



What more can NGN do to support individuals and communities living in fuel poverty, other than new connections?

You felt that we could provide an important role in providing advice to those experiencing fuel poverty.

75% of you felt that we should promote low carbon alternatives (like heat pumps) when talking to customers.

When new connections are made, you want us to ensure that householders can use them effectively by targeting advice on using their new heating system, how best to use it safely and economically (timers etc), and how to understand tariffs and suppliers available (avoiding standard variable tariffs which aren't necessarily the cheapest).

You also felt we could provide other important advice and referrals, including:

- Signposting hardship funds for customers struggling to pay bills
- Promoting sources of energy efficiency advice (covering large and small measures)
- Using local radio to talk about options available for energy advice and support and CO awareness
- Have a presence at community festivals (as the Police, Fire & Rescue and Ambulance Services do)
- Identifying where connection will never be cost effective (nongasmap.org.uk) and be the referrer for specific advice on where householders can go for support or on other types of heating. Organisations could then explore alternatives such as district heating schemes too
- Supporting customers who have had appliances disconnected for safety reasons

And more broadly, you had a range of ideas for how we could improve our offer and support:

- Ensure that policies and initiatives are 'joined up' e.g. connections, funding for gas heating systems and insulation schemes.
- If NGN has suitable unused properties, offer usage of them to appropriate charities for community benefit.
- Ensure there are initiatives to meet both short-term needs (e.g. being able to top up a prepayment card now) and longer-term needs (e.g. insulation or double glazing) to alleviate fuel poverty.
- Consider having a network of regional advisers to be the single point of contact for customers getting a fuel poor FPNES connection.

"Warm Hub is a fantastic thing to be doing to help people in fuel poverty."



"If you're doing a gas central heating system you need to check they've energy insulation in the loft and walls as well."

"You're sending all these messages about how we help you in an emergency, but could you link in something saying, 'If your problem isn't smelling gas, but your problem is you're struggling, here's another number.'"

What other advice or referrals should we provide for customers as part of our day to day contact?

"[Safeguarding] is a responsibility for any agency that's dealing with potential vulnerable people has to be aware of."

"It should be CO only so as not to dilute the seriousness of that message because it can kill you. Energy efficiency would be OK, but not the others."

We asked you 'when undertaking its normal activities, in addition to Carbon Monoxide awareness, which, if any, of these topics should NGN staff provide advice or referrals on?'. Opinions on this question varied. Although some of you saw the link between reducing bills to alleviate fuel poverty through switching, another stated: "I've no idea what energy supplier switching has got to do with it."

Option	Votes (n=12)
Energy efficiency	92%
Energy supplier switching	42%
Fire safety	8%
Safeguarding	50%
Nothing	8%

What can NGN do to increase awareness of Carbon Monoxide gas safety?

You felt that it was essential NGN continues to work in this area because it saves lives.

You recognised that there was still very low awareness, across all demographics, of situations where there is a risk of CO poisoning, including from a neighbouring property, from log burners, from BBQs (e.g. at festivals), and from LPG, as well as from open fires, boilers, gas fires and cookers in the home.

You highlighted the following issues relating to CO awareness:

- Local authorities are obliged to provide smoke alarms in social housing, but not CO alarms because they do annual gas safety checks which they consider to be sufficient.
- The importance of smoke alarms has had public service media campaigns, but CO much less so.
- Private landlords are not obliged to provide CO alarms for gas-heated homes (they are for homes with solid fuel).
- People believe CO monitors are more expensive than they are



You suggested a wide range of potential and current initiatives we could fund or promote including posters for GP surgeries, encouraging letting and estate agents to flag the issue more strongly, and mandating for new builds.

"NGN should lobby government and lead the fight"



Thank you for reading the report.
We would welcome any further
feedback you have regarding our
plans for the next regulatory
period. If you would like to
contact us to share your views,
please get in touch by emailing
stakeholder@northerngas.co.uk

For further information contact:
stakeholder@northerngas.co.uk

together.northerngasnetworks.co.uk

