

Supporting our customers in vulnerable situations COVID-19 Stakeholder Report



19th August 2020

together
we are
the network

Thank you

Thank you again to those of you who joined us for our Customers in Vulnerable Situations COVID-19 follow up workshop.

Jill, Steve, Jenny, myself and Laura got a great deal out of the session, seeing familiar faces.

We were really pleased that the Zoom format appeared to work without any challenges.

In July's workshop, we had dedicated some time to talk about the impact of COVID 19. Unfortunately, we ran short of time, but in the discussions we did have, we were delighted with the level of engagement around the two questions in relation to COVID-19, which were:

Overview of key themes from COVID-19 questions

Question 1

What has been the impact of the pandemic on hidden vulnerability?

Feedback:

- Increase in debt/money management issues, specifically with those people who were 'Just About Managing.'
- More language barriers when engaging over the phone rather than face to face
- Increase in child safeguarding issues, due to more time being spent at home
- Increase in fraud/scams on the doorstep/ phone/on-line
- Increase in self-isolation from energy supplies due to financial issues

Question 2

How has the current pandemic impacted demand for essential services to support customers in vulnerable situations?

Feedback:

Most people agreed that yes, there has been an increase in the demand for certain services and that we have also had to adapt to how these services are offered:

- Increase in access to food/fuel banks
- Increase in access to debt/financial advice
- Increase in need to support those feeling isolated and innovative in the services/ support we provide

In both the July and August workshops, you provided some invaluable feedback in relation to the emerging issues around the pandemic, which we will be using as the foundations for our next steps. We are now working hard together as a team, to make sure that we have a full agenda for the workshop on Tuesday 13th October. The theme of which will be around Vulnerable Customer Touchpoints /Customer Journey.

I'd love to hear what you think are the next steps, especially around COVID-19 and associated challenges. Please also feel free to give us thoughts on how we can engage better between our workshops – what conversation tools you have used, which ones work well, or don't work well!

If you were unable to make it on the day and would like to share your views, it would be great to hear from you.

Best wishes,

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Purpose of the workshop

The purpose of the COVID-19 follow up workshop, was to review what we had covered in July to share NGN's COVID-19 research and gather feedback on how NGN can better reach customers in vulnerable situations, impacted either directly or indirectly by the pandemic. Finally, we took the opportunity to ask our stakeholders for feedback on how we could shape the Community Partnering Fund (Round 5), as a result of the changing landscape. All of this enables us to revisit our focus areas and further develop our future engagement plan.

The agenda for the workshop was as follows:

- Provide a recap from the July session – COVID -19 questions 1 & 2
- Provide an insight into NGN COVID-19 research produced in June
- Cover the third COVID-19 question which we were unable to cover previously
 - How can we better reach customers

in vulnerable situations, impacted either directly or indirectly by the pandemic?

- What have you done or are doing differently?
- What do you think NGN should do/get involved with/do more of?
- Are there any social partners that you could work with to achieve more?
- Think about whether these needs are short/medium/long term
- Invite feedback for the Community Partnering Fund Round 5 - Autumn 2020

"Keep doing these sessions they are so valuable to NGN and to stakeholders."

"Great to be able to still have these discussions even when we can't meet face-to-face."

"These workshops are very useful in the sense that, they provide a platform to discuss, learn, engage and find solutions for problems/challenges in relation to vulnerable customers."

22

delegates

8.87

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.

You Said	So we've
Tailor the next session on the vulnerable customer journey / touchpoints to reflect where you said we'd have the most impact	Paired with customer journeys in the next workshop we will be considering how your communities can best access services and support
COVID-19 should be introduced as a theme to the Community Partnering Fund	Spoken to Leeds Community Foundation/Northern Powergrid to adapt the fund to reflect COVID-19 / community resilience
We need to consider our internal colleagues' mental well being	Set up a colleague engagement event in early October, discussions around the types of services we can provide
More time is required in the break-out sessions	Tailored the workshop in October to reflect this
Networking opportunities – not much time nor space during digital sessions	Prior to the next workshop, we will be sharing details about what each of our partners do, how to link up with each other and how each partner's work links to NGN. We will also gather your ideas on what is the best way to network in the current climate and how to work together better, to increase referrals
Increased risk of CO – unable to get appliances maintained / replaced due to financial issues	Embarked upon an exercise to gather better data around CO and understand how to target those in specific areas. Included boiler repairs as an element of the Hardship Fund

What we'll do now:

Our engagement plan for the next 12 months is:

October 2020 - Understanding how to reach and engage effectively with vulnerable customer touchpoints (this received the second highest number of votes from our emerging themes session in February) and how can we innovate to make a difference.

February 2021 - Annual review and strategic plan for next 12 months.

July 2021 - TBC

Key themes emerging from this workshop - NGN COVID-19 research (via chat)

NGN introduced an overview of the COVID-19 research commissioned by NGN. This sought to understand what emerging trends there could be, and an early actions/interventions that could be taken. NGN then asked for stakeholders to consider any other impacts of COVID that they were seeing, or any that resonated more than others.

Financial

- Larger energy bills / being at home - concerns, especially during winter
- Demand for specific debt advice fell during lockdown but was replaced by more general queries and info regarding redundancy or benefits.

Mental health

- Disabled people's (1:5 people) mental health significantly impacted - isolation, barriers also affecting service provision/ economic impact
- Service inaccessible or closed

Physical health

- Longer term issue ie significant drop in attendances at A&E/ long term condition clinics, etc. Concern about the number of people with acute and long term conditions that are going to present to their GP/hospital/clinic en masse

Education

- For disadvantaged children the education gap has grown immensely with more affluent peers having 7 hours more a week of home schooling. Some vulnerable children will have had no home schooling (possibly no internet access/off electricity grid) or very little. It will take years from the to catch up. Not to mention the impact on their social and emotional development.

General

- How can we encourage customers to be open with us about their mental and physical health so we can better support them? Sensitive subject for people to discuss and seeking support can be a big step.
- It's more difficult to access any service as everyone has reduced staffing, wait times on the phone have increased massively
- We take third party referrals for energy support so expect demand to increase even more now that vulnerable households are becoming more linked in with their support workers and problems are being identified
- There will be so many disclosures when children return to school which will result in more children going into care. There are already not enough carers.
- Increase risk arising from need for help that the backlog of people falling below radar grows
- All themes discussed can and will be precursors to further vulnerabilities down the line such as gambling/substance addiction, domestic violence and child abuse. Looking at "At Risk" customers as well as the vulnerable, could be important in helping manage this

Poll results (SLIDO)

NGN COVID-19 Research

Of the four impacts, which has had the most impact on the customers and communities you serve? (22 responses)

Economic – 55%

Accessing service and support/ isolation – 45%

Mental health & wellbeing – 27%

Physical – 0%

Which area do you think NGN could make the most difference/ have the most impact in? (22 responses)

Accessing services and support - 77 %

Economic impact - 18 %

Mental health and wellbeing - 5 %

COVID-19 Question 3 How can we better reach customers in vulnerable situations, impacted either directly or indirectly by the pandemic?

For this session we broke into three virtual discussions rooms, and discussed each of the following points in turn:

a) What have you done or are doing differently?

- Delivered training and support virtually
- Had to be innovative about how we reach the most in need

b) What do you think NGN should do/get involved with/do more of?

- More focus on CO awareness, gas safety checks and links to households with cold related health issues
- NGN should continue forging new relationships with hard to reach communities in the west Yorkshire area.
- The support that NGN already provides us with has enabled us to carry on our work during this difficult period and we are forever grateful for that
- Use your network to sign post individuals to other forms of help and support. Utilise public visibility in the field, online and during other contacts.
- Could NGN pay towards boiler services

- ENW have grants with Eden Council, maybe we could collaborate. Hardship fund?

- If NGN would share any research on the impact of C19 on the communities they serve that would be valuable to help us with bid writing.
- Possible have some short pilot projects to test deliverability to inform scale projects
- Certainly the knock on of the increase in mental health issues will result in more people taking their own lives. Prioritising mental health support for your own team at NGN and your customers should be looked at. I don't know what you already offer you may have this covered.
- Comprehensive signposting to appropriate services to support wider needs

c) Are there any social partners that you could work with to achieve more?

- I wondered if there is a role for the media to help you promote the services available to vulnerable? The local news in Newcastle is always keen to hear what we are doing on COVID at the University for example.
- We'd be happy to be connected to other charities and organisations that NGN works with that support disadvantaged

children to share best practice and see if we can work together. If there is funding in the innovation fund we have some new ideas for how to reach the children.

- Partnership working with a charity that reaches out to disability and access further research on the impacts on Covid on disabilities and long term conditions.
- Need to understand people individually and the impacts of covid, rather than fitting solutions to PSR codes needs. Training of customer service staff is really key.
- Confidence and credibility is vital to encourage elderly and vulnerable households to engage
- If it would help with referrals we could explore the possibility that we act as single referral point for people who have been identified by NGN or other NGN partners who need debt/benefits advice from any CAB in the NGN rather than having multiple contact points.

Community Partnering Fund

The final session during the workshop focussed on future plans for the Community Partnering Fund. Jill Walker gave an overview of how the fund had been adapted in light of COVID 19, and then presented the group with options for changes to the fund for the Sept – Feb (Autumn) funding window

Option 1: £50k to be given to the resilience forums to support COVID 19, rather than for the usual community projects

Option 2: Maintain existing CPF, but allow organisations to include support with staff/building costs as long as they are associated with specific projects aligned to existing themes.

Option 3: Maintain existing CPF, with addition of COVID-19 alongside existing themes – PSR, Energy Efficiency etc...

Option 4: Do nothing and leave as-is

Next Steps:

We want to keep the conversation going. Zoom worked well and we will continue to use this platform. However, we are still looking at how we can interact better in between sessions by using break out discussion sessions. Aside from the planned engagement activities, we welcome your ideas on any aspects of our business and the work that we are doing together.

Feedback on this session. Have you had further thoughts on some 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

Poll results (SLIDO) - 18 respondents

Which is your preferred option for the CPF?

Make COVID-19 an additional core theme for CPF - 100% of respondents

Event Evaluation and Future Engagement – 15 responses

Summary:	Customers in Vulnerable Situations Workshop	Friday 10th July
Event Evaluation		
Q1	What do you want to get out of today?	CV-19 discussions from other organisations/associated impact. Understand what others have changed to manage customer needs. How is everyone else managing? Share best practice. How services have been adapted due to CV-19. Learn how to better protect vulnerable customers during these challenging times. Breadth of understanding of vulnerability. Links to vulnerable clients with cold related ill health. A better understanding of how NGN is approaching COVID-19 particularly in terms of vulnerable customers. Learn more about the longer term impacts of the pandemic and its economic consequences. What other people have done to manage the situation with CV-19 and how that has impacted them. Looking for creative solutions. Understand what sort of vulnerable customers/people NGN are hoping to access. Understanding your research on the impacts of Covid on Vulnerable households and how we can help.
Q2	Choose 2 words from this list below to describe this event	Insightful, interesting, (Also - enjoyable, creative, well organised, worthwhile)
Q3	Overall, how satisfied were you with the event?	8.87 (overall)
Q4	How would you rate the discussions?	8.93
Q5	How would you rate the event contact and speakers?	9.27
Q5	How would you rate the networking opportunities?	6.2
Q7	Is there anything you think could be improved / changes for future workshops?	Key themes - Delegates commented that sharing contact details would be useful as digital does not allow for much networking. More time to be given for break-out sessions. Suggestion to have organisations with similar missions in the same break-out room/share best practices. Also suggesting NGN facilitates a networking session focussed on working together to achieve NGN's goals in terms of community engagement. More time in break-out's so everyone has a chance to speak. Request for a brief overview of related projects from partners

Q8	Is there anything else you would like to tell us?	Key themes - Keep doing these sessions they are so valuable to NGN and to stakeholders. More interactivity between all involved. Great to be able to still have these discussions even when we can't meet face-to-face. It was well managed and a good combination of chat, discussions and presentations. Zoom worked really well so I think it's good that you made the move from teams to zoom for these types of meetings. A big thank you for your continued support. These workshops are very useful in the sense that, they provide a platform to discuss, learn, engage and find solutions for problems/challenges in relation to vulnerable customers. It was a good session, thank you. It would be good to hear at the beginning of the next session how you have been able to take our input and feedback on board.
Q9	Thinking of yourself as a stakeholder of NGN, how satisfied are you with the relationship that you have with NGN	9:13
Q10	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?	
	NGN keeps me up to date on their business plans	Strongly agree – 4 Agree – 10 Somewhat agree – 1
	NGN provided me with clear information about their business performance	Strongly agree – 3 Agree – 7 Somewhat agree – 4 Neither agree/disagree – 1
	NGN provided me with opportunities to give feedback on the topics that interest me	Strongly agree – 7 Agree – 8
	NGN allows me to give feedback through my preferred method	Strongly agree – 6 Agree – 8 Somewhat agree – 1
	NGN makes it clear how they have used feedback to change	Strongly agree – 2 Agree – 11 Somewhat agree – 1 Neither agree/disagree – 1

Future Engagement

Q1	How else would you like to engage with NGN in future?	I don't think engagement can be improved upon. Engagement is currently great. NGN have been a huge support in enhancing our approach to managing vulnerable customers. Content with current opportunities. Face to face workshops when we can. Continue as-is. Current methods with NGN are adequate. More on a 1:1 level if possible. Email/phone updates and Zoom meetings on subjects that are relevant to our work with NGN and that help us support NGN using our knowledge. Workshops are really useful. National project looking at data sharing for customers who need more support via PSR. It would be great if we could consider a local agreement to share customer PSR data with their consent, so we can all deliver a consistent service.
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Tell us what you think

Thank you for reading this report. We welcome any further feedback, thoughts or ideas you have. Please drop us a line on at stakeholder@northerngas.co.uk

For further information contact:
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