

Your Voice
Customer Affordability & Vulnerability Panel

1 October 2024

Minutes

1. Present:

Dave Thompson, Bernice Law, Peter Fitzhenry, Richard Inman, Amber Cairns, Stephanie Smith, Simone Mansbridge. Mike Gauterin, David Burdis, Dominic Griffiths. Christian Hartley,

2. Apologies:

David Tai, Luke Pilot, Jason Bromley, Chris Jones, Michelle Atkinson, Steve Cullen, George Oldbury. Helen Handzel, Jo Woodcock, Jackie Cassidy., Daniel Barr, Karen Swindon, Paul Morris, Karen Savage

	Issues
a)	<p>Action Update: The Panel agreed to update the action log as there are a number of completed actions arising from this meeting. Actions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generate membership interest for the Blackpool Vulnerability Summit: Complete • Roundtable topic suggestions: Energy update, Universal Credit, New government welfare policies. More topics welcome • Future agenda item: UU’s new strategic partners • DT recommend Warrington Poverty Truth Commission’s case study videos. Pending • Future agenda item: UU feedback on OFWAT Final Determination and the National Social Tariff. Links provided • A&V AGM linked to a Summit meeting in Planning • DT suggested more stalls at the Summits and attendance certificates. Complete • JC agreed to link SS to the Experian Support Hub. Outstanding • SS to analyse PSR compared to county level IOMD. Data analysis underway • Members asked for case studies to go on the Hardship Hub site. Ongoing • WDP and Salford Welfare Advice to support UU’s analysis of customers with care costs. Action.

b) Customer Vulnerability Update.

Steph Smith (SS) took the group through a vulnerability presentation. SS highlighted:

- Preparations will be commencing for the next ISO assessment in 2025
- That UU is on track on Priority Services Registration. Currently the register stands at 477,000.
- Around 15% of North West Households are on the register. The target for 2030 is 20% of Households.
- Data sharing and partnership working is key to getting more Households registered.
- UU is working to get a data sharing partnership in place with a Local Authority. Local Councils hold lots of sources of useful data such as blue badge and bin collection support.
- SS outlined some enhanced services targeted at families with children under 5.
- Recent moves to increase support offered to pensioners over 90 years. (43,000 over 90's registered on PSR.)
- Recent partnerships with Sign Solutions offering video supported customer service calls. SS also mentioned work with Stammer British Association and Big Food Project.
- UU is working to provide training and awareness raising to partner organisations. UU customer service staff have received specific awareness training (kidney care, Mind)
- UU is improving how its responds to customers who have recently experienced a bereavement.
- New customer service booklet and leaflets being developed.
- SS mentioned that UU has identified an issue with written correspondence for some customers who are deaf.

Q. Dave Thompson (DT) suggested contacting Directors of Adult Services as a constructive way to contact the right officers within Local Councils.

A. SS to make use of this communication channel. **(Action).**

Q. David Burdis (DB) asked if UU provide awareness training to its Debt Collection agencies.

A. SS and Amber Cairns (AC) confirmed UU is in the process of providing vulnerability training to its Debt Collection agencies. This will include direct pathways back to UU for clarification regarding vulnerability. UU is also seeking to empower these agencies to take more specific action to support vulnerable customers.

Q. Dominic Griffiths (DG) asked about UU's experience of data sharing with other utility sectors.

A. SS confirmed that there is a positive working relationship with a number of utilities.

Q. DG suggested including Scottish Power and other (non-ENW) electricity networks. **(Action)**.

Q. Bernice Law (BL) asked about the PSR renewal letter and if it led to automatically being included in the PSR for other Utilities.

A. SS agreed to review the content of the letter and confirm that it includes automatic registration. **(Action)**.

Q. DT invited SS to attend a WDP virtual meeting and offered for AC and SS to attend a WDP's inhouse Disability Training session. **(Action)**. DT asked if UU could distribute copies of its new awareness leaflets and booklets.

Q. DT suggested contacting RNID regarding the needs of deaf customers. **(Action)**.

c) Affordability schemes update.

Amber Cairns (AC) took the Panel through a presentation focusing upon:

- The number of households taken out of water poverty and how UU has exceeded OFWAT's household cap.
- OFWAT's positive feedback regarding UU's AMP8 customer support packages and the shareholder contribution towards these proposed support schemes.
- The extent of UU's customer support packages.
- The work of UU's trust fund
- UU is working in partnership
- UU has recruited a new outreach & engagement manager
- Work to reduce barriers to smart meter installation
- From April 2025, UU is setting up a new Trusted Partner Scheme that will allow certain partners to confirm a customer's circumstances so removing a barrier to support. This would apply to organisations such as CAB, Age UK, DWP.
- UU is working to build up a network of Community Champions.
- AC highlighted UU's digital inclusion work and its work to promote the Hardship Hub.
- AC outlined UU's new Water Without Worry campaign which will see all relevant information available from one launch page.

- Work is commencing on the latest series of Affordability and Vulnerability Summits for 2025.

Q. Bernice Law (BL) asked if there is any National Social Tariff update.

A. MG advised that UU is supporting a national tariff. It remains to be seen how the new Government takes this issue forward.

Q. DT asked if there could be support targeted at high water demand customers because of health-related matters (dialysis, incontinence).

A. AC advised that the Water Sure Plus group was targeted at customers with medical needs. The current proposal for the expanded Water Sure Plus includes an extra criteria allowing access based on a low income and certain Health related benefits (PIP).

Q. DB advised that it is hard to qualify for certain health related benefits and that there is a long wait for claims to be processed.

A.SC advised that UU makes allowances for processing delays and takes account of any underlying benefit entitlement when considering a request for support.

Q. DT asked if WDP could be put forward as a Trusted Partner. DT also suggested Volunteer Umbrella Groups as another potential Trusted Partner.

A. AC confirmed that this is the type of local organisation UU wants to work with.

Q. DB asked if UU is working to tackle economic abuse alongside its work to support victims of domestic abuse.

A.AC advised that UU has specific resources tasked with investigating domestic abuse and that it has clear protocols for dealing with victims of this financial abuse. DB offered to provide more details about how they are supporting victims of economic abuse. AC offered to outline how UU is responding to this at a future meeting. **(Action)**.

Q. DT suggested the 2025 Summits could include themes around Pension Credits and other DWP plans.

A. AC agreed to include this in the programme planning.

Q. DB. Suggested using a Manchester based venue for the Affordability Summit.

A.AC is currently looking for accessible and affordable venues across the region.

<p>d)</p>	<p>Deep Dive: Energy Efficiency update</p> <p>Dominic Griffiths from EPPLUS took the Panel through a presentation about some of the latest initiatives designed to help tackle fuel poverty by helping households reduce their energy usage, improve their home energy efficiency, reduce carbon emissions and reduce energy bills. Whilst EPPLUS primarily work across Cheshire and Merseyside, they currently have a contract to provide advice and support across the whole of the North West. EPPLUS has worked with over 9,000 North West households to reduce fuel poverty and has helped bring in over £1 million of grants. EPPLUS top 4 energy saving tips are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open your energy bills and statements; • Learn about your energy usage and how you can make changes to reduce your energy consumption; • Install and use a Smart Meter; and • Register for Priority Services as this has a range of support mechanisms. <p>Q. DT suggested that it would be a good idea to ask all Utility providers to attend a session at the Vulnerability or Affordability Summits to set out their customer support offers and relevant case studies.</p> <p>A.AC will take on board this suggestion. (Action).</p> <p>Q. DG has a training package that would work on the Hardship Hub.</p> <p>A. AC to work with DG to include it within the Hardship Hub content.</p> <p>Q. DT invited DG to present to WDP’s Energy Team and to produce information for inclusion within a Quarterly Briefing.</p> <p>A. DG agreed to do this. (Action).</p>
<p>e)</p>	<p>Panel members update</p> <p>BL advised that UU is expecting the Final Determination response on 19 December 2024. This will help finalise customer support schemes for April 2025.</p> <p>DB advised that he had seen a significant shift in UU’s approach towards more customer support.</p> <p>Christian Hartley (CH) advised that Stockport Housing is in the process of finalising a new water rate collection arrangement with UU.</p>

	<p>Richard Ingram (RI) advised that rural communities are currently experiencing challenges arising out of the reduction in the winter fuel allowance at a time of rising energy prices.</p> <p>DT, on behalf of Steve Cullen (SC), advised that CAB is still reporting rising demand for its services. He reported that there is a significant amount of work to encourage Pension Credit Take Up.</p> <p>DG advised that Fuel Bank Foundation are reporting extremely high demand for fuel vouchers and, to date, have issued over £1 million in vouchers. DG reflected upon similar trend with regards food banks. DT suggested inviting Fuel Bank Foundation to a future Panel meeting. (Action).</p> <p>DG advised that there is an 18 month delay in processing Pension Credits.</p> <p>DT advised that WDP's energy team is approaching the end of its two-year funding period but that work is underway to try and extend this for a further two years. WDP also report high levels of demand for its school holiday food provision.</p>
f)	<p>AOB DG asked to join the Panel which was welcomed.</p>
g)	<p>DONM 14 January 2025 (10-12)</p>