

Your Voice
Customer Affordability & Vulnerability Panel
2 July 2024
Minutes

1. Present:

Dave Thompson, Bernice Law, Peter Fitzhenry, Daniel Barr, Paul Morris, Karen Savage, Jackie Cassidy, Richard Inman, Amber Cairns, Stephanie Smith, Jayne Hayes. Mike Gauterin, Helen Handzel, Tracey Bennett, Karen Swindon. Jo Woodcock

2. Apologises:

David Tai, Luke Pilot, Jason Bromley, Chris Jones, Christian Hartley, Michelle Atkinson, Steve Cullen, George Oldbury.

	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"> • Vulnerability strategy update: complete • SS and RI to meet to discuss engaging with rural parishes: complete • Circulate membership questionnaire: complete • Generate membership interest at the Blackpool Vulnerability Summit: complete
b)	<p>Panel arrangements: Membership questionnaire feedback and discussion</p> <p>Dave Thompson (DT) and Amber Cairns (AC) took the Panel through the results of the membership questionnaire. The feedback identified a number of areas for further attention including spread of representation, guest speakers, roundtable discussions and attendance and physical meetings versus virtual. Steph Smith (SS) advised that the Vulnerability Summit had generated a number of expressions of interest in joining the Panel (Action).</p> <p>DT asked Panel members to let Peter Fitzhenry (PF) know of any future topics for a roundtable discussion. (Action). Jayne Hayes (JH) suggested approaching the DWP for an update about the final stages of UC roll out and that fuel poverty remains a</p>

key topic for discussion. **(Action)**. It was suggested that foodbanks and carers would be good topics for discussion.

SS also suggested approaching UU's new partners to provide a short discussion about their work. **(Action)**. DT suggested that case studies are a positive way of bringing partners work to life. Warrington's Poverty Truth Commission is developing a series of video case studies. **(Action)**.

Richard Inman (RI) suggested reaching out to parish councils and local parish champions who may understand vulnerability in their local areas. Steph Smith (SS) agreed that UU is seeking to tap into the networks RI refers to, including UU articles in Rural news bulletins.

Mike Gauterin (MG) offered to provide an update about OFWAT's feedback about UU's future affordability proposals. **(Action)**. MG also suggested reviewing the position with regards to a National Social Tariff. **(Action)**.

DT raised the issue of holding an annual get together, possibly in conjunction with either the affordability or vulnerability summits. **(Action)**.

c) Customer Vulnerability Update.

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

- The recent successful ISO assessment
- The geographical spread of registration at county level.
- The work UU is doing to increase registration and future PSR targets.
- Vulnerability Strategy is live on UU's website and has achieved the Crystal Mark registration
- SS highlighted some of the new organisations UU is working with (e.g. Safe Spaces, Mencap, Stamma)
- The Vulnerability Summit held at Blackpool

DT commented about the positive atmosphere and high level of participation at the Vulnerability Summit. DT suggested trying to attract more organisation stalls in the break out areas. **(Action).**

DT suggested issuing participation certificates as a way of marking UU's training and development offers. **(Action).**

Jackie Cassidy (JC) offered to put SS in touch with Experian Support Hub. **(Action).**

Jo Woodcock (JW) asked how the county level take up numbers compared to the sub regional populations and the indices of multiple deprivation for each area. SS agreed to reflect on this analysis and to provide a comparison. **(Action).**

Karen Swindon (KS) asked if the different county numbers reflected the level of affluence between different areas. SS agreed and also stated that rural areas tended to have lower levels of take up.

MG advised that the future target would be 20% as a fair reflection of need across the wider region. The current 15% is a significant increase on the previous 7%. DT commented that the North West has around 22-23% disabled residents. Adding in older people would suggest a potential audience of around 30% although not all this sub group would need support in the event of a problem with water supply.

RI suggested contacting social services as a good source of potential customers. SS agreed and advised that UU has some strong LA partnerships citing Bolton, Stockport, Blackpool as examples where there is good data sharing in place.

d) Affordability schemes update.

Jayne Hayes (JH) and Amber Cairns (AC) took the Panel through a presentation focusing on:

- The number of households benefiting from UU’s customer support schemes and the number who are now water debt free following joint work with UU and its customers.
- The work of UU’s Trust Fund
- How UU is working in partnership
- UU has recruited a new engagement manager. UU have attended over 239 local events across the region
- JH provided an update about the growing use of the Hardship Hub. AC asked for any examples, case studies or initiatives for inclusion on the site. **(Action).**
- JH highlighted the number of customers lifted out of water poverty and the number of customers accessing the various support schemes and the number of customers on the priority register.
- MG advised that the pending draft determination will see UU commit further resources to help customers who are struggling with their water bills. The target is to double the number of customers benefiting from these support schemes.
- The presentation finished with a focus upon the services future initiatives.

JC asked how water poverty is defined. JH advised that it is a nationally prescribed definition and is linked to the percentage of income (after housing costs) needed to pay for water. UU’s support schemes are designed to get resident’s water charges below a 3% income threshold.

DT welcomed the presentation as a good reflection of UU’s commitment to supporting its customers who are struggling with the cost-of-living crisis. DT also suggested working with the Integrated Care Boards as a means of extending access to these schemes.

DT offered UU support in identifying and dealing with customers with care costs. **(Action).**

e) Cost of Living Crisis

Dave Thompson from Warrington Disability Partnership highlighted:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warrington DP is working with other agencies on a Poverty Truth Commission. This is exploring the impact of austerity and the cost-of-living crisis within Warrington. • WDP’s energy advisers are extremely busy as residents seek help reducing their energy bills. • Evictions from across the private and social sector are increasing as the Covid support measures end. Some 75 families are living in one bedroom hotel accommodation.
f)	<p>AOB</p> <p>The next UU sponsored Disability Awareness Day is 14 July 2024 at Walton Gardens.</p> <p>United Utilities is a joint principal sponsor and has recently been joined by Electricity Northwest which is a corporate sponsor. This national event involves some 240 organisations, 12 marques with 200 exhibitors. Details of this event are available on www.disabilitypartnership.org.uk</p>
g)	<p>AOB</p> <p>MG advised that there has been a small delay in OFWAT issuing the new draft determination arising out of the general election. The draft is due to be sent out on 11 July 2024. UU will then be in a position to set out its new customer support packages.</p>
h)	<p>DONM</p> <p>1 October 2024 (10-12)</p>