

Your Voice
Customer Affordability & Vulnerability Panel
9 April 2024
Minutes

1. Present:

Dave Thompson, Steve Cullen, Bernice Law, Peter Fitzhenry, Daniel Barr, George Oldbury, David Thompson, Paul Morris, Karen Savage, Jackie Cassidy, Richard Inman, Amber Cairns, Stephanie Smith, Jayne Hayes.

2. Apologises:

David Tai, Luke Pilot, Jason Bromley, Chris Jones, Paul Morris, Mike Gauterin, Christian Hartley, Michelle Atkinson, Helen Handzel.

	Issues
a)	Action Update: The Panel agreed to update the action log. Seven outstanding issues from previous meetings: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Two future agenda items• Five updates pending

b) Customer Affordability Update.

Steph Smith (SS) took the group through a vulnerability presentation, highlighting:

- At March 2024, over 400,000 households registered with priority services.
- UU finalist in UK contact centre awards. Results due in near future.
- SS took Panel through case study of new partnership with The Life Rooms.
- Work around the vulnerability strategy is subject to further consultation, prior to go-live in 2025. This will be subject to a further report at July's A&V Panel meeting **(Action)**. SS will send through a link about further feedback.
- SS highlighted the Vulnerability Summit being held in Blackpool on 8 May. All are welcome.
- Alongside external engagement work, SS has been attending internal UU team meetings to raise awareness of the PSR and general support that is available for vulnerable customers (take charge campaign with ENW).

Richard Inman (RI) suggested contacting rural Parish Councils to spread information about the priority services register and other support schemes. SS advised that UU had previously contacted these Councils but that it may be a good time to revisit this. SS and RI to discuss this opportunity. **(Action)**.

DT asked if there would be a "marketplace" provision at the Vulnerability Summit. SS advised space would be available for other agencies to explain their support offer. These can be booked via SS.

c) 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. JH pointed to £2.7m of support provided by UU's Trust Fund. 12,500 customers are now water debt free following joint work with UU and its customers.
- The work of UU's Trust Fund including a case study. Its work will feature on the next agenda (Action).
- UU is working in partnership with Cadent and CAB to deliver pop up support in a variety of venues (shopping centres, food banks, churches etc).
- UU has recruited a new Water Efficiency Manager who will attend the next Panel meeting.
- JH provided an update about the growing use of the Hardship Hub.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • JH also provided an update about a new Pensioner tariff designed to extend the support available to this group of customers. • JH highlighted the number of customers lifted out of water poverty and the number of customers accessing various support schemes and the number of customers on the priority register. • The presentation finished with a focus on the services future initiatives. <p>DT suggested that UU’s employees may benefit from spending a day job shadowing with front line employees from other organisations. JH welcomed this opportunity and AC will link up with DT to make the necessary arrangements.</p> <p>DT asked for clarity about the “technology dependent families” segment within UU’s predictive behaviour model. JH advised that this was one of a number of subsets within its predictive model and had been highlighted by UU’s research partners.</p> <p>DT/SC/GO offered support UU develop its service model to ensure an effective reflection on any care component and the treatment of related income streams.</p>
<p>d)</p>	<p>Cost of Living Crisis</p> <p>Steve Cullen (SC) highlighted several pressing concerns and new developments including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A recent CAB report (Running on Empty) highlighted the increase in households who are experiencing “negative household budgets”. • The rising demand for affordable accommodation at a time when private sector rents are increasing significantly. • Partnership with Cadent/WBC/CAB/WDP to offer outreach support to additional clients who are struggling with rising costs. • Recent legislative changes that have made it easier to obtain debt relief orders. • Final stages of the roll out of Universal Credit which will replace a number of legacy benefits. • Universal credit will only pay a housing benefit/allowance for 52 weeks rent in a 53-week rent year. This will leave households struggling to make up the difference. • Local advice services commented on UU’s positive approach to helping households who are struggling to pay their bills.

George Oldbury (GO) reflected on similar issues and described some recent developments within the Salford MBC area including:

- More households who are simply running out of money and cannot make ends meet.
- Major issue is fuelled bills and arrears. Whilst fuel companies can help with “pay what you can” schemes, the debt remains, and this stores up issues for the future.
- The Household Support Fund that was due to end in March 2024 has been extended until October 2024.

Macmillan is seeing more cost-of-living issues for cancer sufferers. They work closely with Step Change, but support options are increasingly limited.

Paul Morris (PM) advised that they are working with Energy Saving Trust and CAB Manchester to deploy fourteen advisers to focus upon wrap around support for a wide range of customers. This is a 4-year project. Electricity North West is working closely with other utilities and community groups to pool resources to offer short term support in the event of an emergency.

Dave Thompson from Warrington Disability Partnership highlighted:

- Warrington DP are working with Cadent to provide a range of support to clients.
- Digital inclusion is a key piece of work given the drive towards online service provision.
- There is a fresh drive by the DWP to try and get people with disabilities into employment. However, employment still leaves households susceptible to affordability issues.
- DT offered UU an opportunity to shadow WDP front line service providers to help improve its understanding of the challenges UU’s customers are facing. (Action).

e) A&V Panel membership

The group discussed gaps in its membership (themes and geography). It was agreed that:

- DT to discuss membership with J Pugh
- SC/DT to pursue CAB representation from across Cumbria or Lancashire
- SS to discuss membership with Carers UK
- PM will speak with Sign Post for carers about joining the group.
- PF to ask Jo Lappin about potential Cumbrian membership.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> JH to talk to colleagues about potential members from Lancashire and will raise this issue at the Vulnerability Summit in Blackpool. (Action). <p>UU will circulate a membership questionnaire to all panel members. (Action).</p>
f)	<p>AOB</p> <p>The next UU sponsored Disability Awareness Day is 14 July 2024 at Walton Gardens.</p>
g)	<p>DONM</p> <p>(2 July 2024 (10-12))</p>