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**VULNERABILITY AND CARBON
MONOXIDE ALLOWANCE (VCMA)
ONLINE STAKEHOLDER WORKSHOP**

FEEDBACK REPORT

JULY 2022



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INTRODUCTION

On 20 July 2022, Wales & West Utilities, Northern Gas Networks, Cadent and SGN hosted an online stakeholder workshop to showcase projects and initiatives funded under the Vulnerability and Carbon Monoxide Allowance (VCMA). This is an allowance given to all Gas Distribution Networks (GDNs) to support projects, aimed at addressing consumer vulnerability and raising awareness of the dangers of carbon monoxide (CO).

The event aimed to give stakeholders information about current projects and initiatives, highlighting collaboration between the gas networks. Participants came from a range of backgrounds, including local authorities, community councils, charities and non-profit organisations. The morning workshop comprised three presentations followed by discussion sessions in breakout rooms. A webinar focusing on measuring the benefits of the VCMA was held in the afternoon. This included a Q&A and a review of feedback from the morning session.

The workshop was split into five sessions. These are shown below:

- Session 1: VCMA Funding and Eligibility
- Session 2: Carbon Monoxide Awareness
- Session 3: Affordability of Energy
- Session 4: Support for Priority Customers
- Session 5: Q&A (Webinar Session)

The GDNs instructed EQ Communications, a specialist stakeholder engagement consultancy, to independently facilitate the workshops and to take notes of the comments made by stakeholders. Comments have not been attributed to individuals to ensure that all stakeholders were able to speak as candidly as possible.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The workshop was opened by Graham Edwards, Chief Executive of Wales & West Utilities. His introduction was followed by a presentation from Nigel Winnan, Customer and Social Obligations Strategy Manager at Wales & West Utilities. Nigel then introduced a short film featuring a range of projects from all of the GDNs, after which there were introductory discussions in breakout rooms. This report contains summaries of the findings from the discussion sessions, as well as verbatim comments and written feedback submitted by stakeholders.

SESSION 2: CARBON MONOXIDE AWARENESS

The presentation for this session went through CO awareness projects. The projects covered were: Pilot with SP Energy Networks, Scout Association, Bonanza Creative – CO in schools, CO national campaign, Cadent Services Beyond the Meter, GP Partnering Pilot, and Game Over. The projects were praised by stakeholders, who felt that they offered good value to customers. Projects that empowered people, such as the Scout Association and Bonanza Creative initiatives, were praised, in addition to Game Over and working with GPs and healthcare bodies.

Engagement with harder-to-reach groups was a shared challenge raised in the discussions. It was felt that service users being offered free CO monitors where possible by charity stakeholders was a valuable way to improve safety. Stakeholders believed GDNs could go further by expanding Bonanza projects into secondary schools. A utility stakeholder suggested that STEM projects in schools were a potentially interesting avenue through which networks could inform people about electricity safety. Charity and utility representatives saw the value in partnering with GDNs on similar projects.

SESSION 3: AFFORDABILITY OF ENERGY

The presentation showed that the GDNs were addressing the affordability of energy by creating sustainable partnerships. The projects showcased were: Fuel Poor Network Extension Scheme (FPNES), Citizens Advice – England and Wales, Fuel Bank Foundation, Home and Well, Marches Energy Action (MEA) – Home Visits Project, Healthy Homes Healthy People, and Foodbank project – linking food and fuel poverty. There was a general consensus that the projects delivered value for customers. One stakeholder asserted that a holistic approach helped people and facilitated engagement. Foodbank project and Home and Well were identified as being especially valuable.

The issue of people deprioritising gas safety, in the light of rising energy costs, was flagged in the discussions. Concerns were raised about gaps in funding and people not coming forward to ask for help. Stakeholders suggested that GDNs should focus on tenants. Collaboration with health and care services was put forward as a route for emulating the success of Home and Well in rural areas. There were calls for a platform to help identify worst-served areas for support for vulnerable people. Free or subsidised CO alarms were again suggested, as there is a real risk that customers would not spend money on these because of fuel poverty and the cost of living. Partnerships were suggested regarding hospital discharge and vouchers for customers on pre-payment meters. Charities were open to partnering with more GDNs.

SESSION 4: SUPPORT FOR PRIORITY CUSTOMERS

The presentation highlighted existing support available via the Priority Services Register (PSR). It was explained that the VCMA provided opportunities beyond interactions between GDNs and stakeholders. The networks would collaboratively fund national projects with regional pilots, possibly creating a blueprint opportunity for national extension. The projects showcased were: Disability Energy Services (DES), MyBnk – schools programme, Age Scotland, Energy Matters – Groundwork/Green Doctors, Centres for Warmth, and PSR social media campaign. An outlook for Year 2 projects was also presented.

Stakeholders felt that the projects delivered great value for customers. Centres for Warmth, Scope, Age UK, and MyBnk projects were picked out for special praise during the discussion. Participants emphasised accessibility and the need to target different groups according to their individual needs. There was a consensus that rising energy prices and the cost of living were serious emerging risks that would put many people in a precarious situation. Stakeholders were amenable to collaboration with networks on projects and highlighted the need to drive PSR registrations. Charity stakeholders were particularly interested in funding and delivery partners for initiatives.

WRITTEN FEEDBACK

After the workshop, stakeholders were asked to complete a short feedback form. Some of the key findings are shown below. A full breakdown of the feedback can be found in Appendix 1 of this report.

- 70% of attendees who filled out a feedback form told us that they found the workshop to be 'very interesting' and 24% found the workshop 'interesting'.
- 59% 'strongly agreed' and 37% 'agreed' that they had had an opportunity to make points and ask questions.
- 50% 'strongly agreed' and 43% 'agreed' that the right topics were discussed on the day.

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- 67% thought EQ Communications' facilitation was 'very good'; a further 24% thought it was 'good'.
 - 63% felt the online format worked 'very well' and 35% thought it worked 'well'.

SESSION 1: VCMA FUNDING AND ELIGIBILITY

Graham Edwards, CEO of Wales & West Utilities, opened the workshop with introductions and scene setting. Nigel Winnan, Customer & Social Obligations Strategy Manager, then offered a primer on the VCMA before explaining the collaborative approach between GDNs. It was highlighted that the first six months focused on getting a small number of projects up and running, getting collaborative contracts and Project Evaluation Appraisals and Procurement processes in place.

Graham explained that the current energy crisis could be seen coming in October 2021, so swift action was taken to get a number of projects in place to support customers over the next two winters, such as Citizens Advice and Fuel Bank Foundation, with a ramp-up in funding. By keeping stakeholders close and providing insight on external factors, including legislation, policy, customer need and funding gaps, the GDNs were able to adapt their strategy quickly. Regular project data and steering group meetings allowed for the outcome of projects to be monitored and for projects to be refined to keep them on track or take them further. After the introduction, a short film on collaboration was played to stakeholders to conclude the session.

SESSION 2: CARBON MONOXIDE AWARENESS

Nigel and the team outlined a number of VCMA projects related to CO awareness. GDNs had a shared ambition to raise awareness of the risks of CO from appliances connected to the gas network and other sources, to effect behavioural change in order to safeguard all those at risk. CO awareness also encompassed insight, research, surveys and advice from trusted experts to effectively target programmes. The networks were working with partners who shared this ambition. The GDNs sought to ensure inclusion for those most at risk of harm and including hard-to-reach customers, making sure that language was not a barrier. The networks were also setting out to deliver national programmes with consistent messaging in order to reach target communities. Nigel followed this by going through CO awareness projects. The projects covered were as below:

- Pilot with SP Energy Networks
- Scout Association
- Bonanza Creative – CO in schools
- CO national campaign
- Cadent Services Beyond the Meter
- GP Partnering Pilot
- Game Over

Stakeholders were then asked to provide their feedback on the showcased projects in the breakout rooms. All of the projects were praised, and stakeholders broadly felt that they offered good value for customers. Raising public awareness about CO, engaging with hard-to-reach groups and improving safety were cited as worthwhile project aims. Utility stakeholders suggested that value is a broad question and can take different forms, including customer awareness.

Projects that empowered people, such as the Scout Association and Bonanza Creative initiatives, were praised, as they made people champions for initiatives. Game Over stood out for its use of TikTok, as the 16-24 demographic were thought to be potentially challenging to break through to on social media and any targeted materials needed to be engaging. Working with GPs and healthcare bodies was considered a good route for promoting these initiatives and for identifying customer vulnerability. Such partnerships were considered especially valuable if referrals resulted in a fire home safety check.

Engagement with harder-to-reach groups was a shared challenge raised in the discussions. It was commented that some ethnic minority customers, including traveller communities, could be suspicious of organisations offering CO advice, and reluctant to share their contact details. It was added that the digitally excluded could also be missed via digital channels. According to one government stakeholder, partnerships were valuable, but needed to prove their longevity in order to inform policy development. The offering by charities of free CO monitors where possible to service users was viewed as a valuable way to improve safety. The comment was made that the approach to measuring social value needed to be considered carefully, and stakeholders agreed that reporting should be done on a consistent basis.

Stakeholders believed that GDNs could go further by expanding Bonanza projects into secondary schools. There were calls for a greater focus on communities who speak a first language other than English, as well as on customers who are deaf and hard of hearing. Diversity and inclusion were considered important for extending reach to different groups, and one charity stakeholder suggested that the GDNs should review their own diversity and representation, particularly at senior level.

Stakeholders believed that unchecked home appliances and alternate forms of heating posed a CO risk to customers, particularly with rising energy prices. An emergency response stakeholder flagged that open fires were increasingly being used without factoring in ventilation. Customers self-disconnecting in winter was also a cause for concern among charity stakeholders.

In terms of similar projects, a utility stakeholder suggested that STEM projects in schools were a potentially interesting avenue through which GDNs could inform people about electricity safety. An

emergency response stakeholder also asserted that school fire safety projects should include CO awareness. Younger people could also be reached by targeting first-time tenants for CO awareness, as well as first-time campers and festival-goers. Charity and utility representatives saw the value in partnering with the networks on similar projects.

FEEDBACK

1. Do you think these projects deliver value for our customers?

- “The projects seem a good fit and will be suitable for vulnerable customers.” Emergency response
- “I think that they are all great, especially projects already working with people in their communities.” Community energy representative
- “My first reaction is that I’m impressed by the diversity and reach to different audiences. It feels like the right thing to do. I was drawn to that social return on investment number. It would be interesting to know how that was calculated. It seems important that they have different schemes focusing on different demographics and age groups” Charity
- “From our experience, these projects are delivering great value by raising awareness of CO, but they also have a wider scope in terms of raising awareness about fuel poverty. CO is just one aspect that allows us to engage with vulnerable people further. Especially now, given the cost-of-living crisis, people will be cutting down on boiler repairs and will be reluctant to renew their appliances. The risks of CO poisoning will be even higher in the near future, so this awareness work is becoming even more important.” Charity
- “We had a young Scout leader who died from CO poisoning because he brought his stove into his tent. Had a partnership with the Scouts existed 10-15 years ago, that death would have been prevented. Now, we have a partnership with the Scouts and as a result, a generation of people who are informed about CO. That is value.” Charity

2. Are there any you’re particularly in favour of?

- “I really like that the Scout and Bonanza projects are all about empowerment and making young people champions of these types of initiatives, as we’re giving them information that they can pass on to their peers and families. This empowerment aspect is really important and aligns nicely with our charity’s work.” Charity
- “Game Over is an interesting one for us, as we are a family charity and target young audiences, so we know how hard it is to engage with that 16-24 demographic. We have our own social media accounts, but these young people don’t want to engage with us, as we’re not seen as cool. I like the TikTok element and would be interested in how it works in practice.” Vulnerability service provider
- “The project I thought was interesting was the GP partnering one. We’ve been thinking about this recently. There will be a lot of people this winter living in cold homes. This will

have a knock-on effect on their health. The rise in winter mortality rates is cause for concern. We're interested in how we might work more closely with the NHS. Charis provides things like vouchers. We can also replace white goods and do boiler repairs, too. I think that health might be quite an interesting lens through which to look at the cost-of-living crisis." Charity

- "The partnership NGN did with GPs in Durham was really good. It highlighted all those things Avril was talking about, the symptoms, plus other things such as the long-term harm. With the Scouts, it's really good we're talking about spreading the word and doing prevention. But there is a benefit there to the Scouts in terms of their own self-esteem in terms of getting that badge, achieving, gaining that knowledge. I think this is the value of all these projects. I think all the projects have that initial benefit, but the best ones have other benefits as well." Charity
- "I know from experience that when you're a kid if someone comes into your school to tell you something, you then go home and pester your mum to get a compost bin or whatever it is, so I think it's really helpful to get into schools." Academic institution

➤ **Are there any obvious gaps?**

- "I live in inner-city Bradford, and I've not heard of anything that's happening here to create awareness of carbon monoxide. We previously worked with Yorkshire Water on community engagement, but I'm not seeing it here, just saying it from my perspective." Charity
- "Regarding the previous point about sustainability, I think there's an opportunity here to liaise with other agencies that are on the ground to work with customers. Talking from our own experience, I'm not sure we're doing as much on carbon monoxide risk, so there might be opportunities there to work harder. I think there have, rightly, been some concerns about risks associated with this." Charity
- "I was thinking about this longevity element, and how it's great that everyone is working together towards various initiatives, but is there a need to show that these projects have worked, but that in order to ensure that the work continues in some form, to ensure that the information gathered from these projects is actually used to help develop policy in this area?" Government
- "If you're looking to engage a younger audience, the trick is to produce something that is actually engaging, as it's such a competitive market. Computer game companies spend billions on marketing to make their game appealing. With regards to what people can view on their phone, even to grab young people's attention for five minutes is difficult. But it's very worthwhile." Charity
- "We offer a CO alarm when we give people CO advice. However, it's been difficult lately because of the cost-of-living crisis, as CO is no longer a priority even though it should be,

so we're trying to really push it by linking it to other schemes. For example, when people come to us for debt advice, we give them a CO monitor." Charity

➤ **How can we quantify the social value they deliver?**

- "It would be good for them to report social value on a consistent basis. I've had a look at the reports, and I don't think they are. It makes comparison tasks quite difficult." Charity
- "I think social value is a very interesting one. But I think we have to be really careful about how we measure it. I think there are other ways we can assess the social values of their services." Charity
- "By meeting people face-to-face, we're seeing them bringing in their elderly relative. More engagement with younger people is something that I think we need to do to help." Charity

3. Is there more we could be doing in this area?

- "Expanding Bonanza projects from primary into secondary schools is a really good potential avenue. This would be great for specific groups of children, such as children leaving care." Charity
- "I think organisations need to do more for those that don't have English as their first language. Using organisations and community centres out there can help with all of that." Charity
- "For us, the hard-to-reach label isn't a negative as such, it's just a scale. There's a large group of people who use social media, watch TV, go out, and so on, and those on the other end of the spectrum who don't have that. In an ideal world anyone could be reached as you could just knock on their door. Even if you physically get to people, it's almost up to them how much they allow you. I'm dealing with someone in an incredibly rural place in a static caravan, and between me and the carers that go in, we're going to make things better for him, but it's still not as easy as someone who you can pick up the telephone for. The harder-to-reach ones have much more limited options for how to contact them. The hardest ones are the travelling community, as it doesn't matter how many appointments you've got planned, if they decide they're going then they're going, and they're on someone else's patch. Another option is the fire service, because they are going into homes and checking the existence of CO monitors and things like that." Charity
- "Engaging with older people who may be in quite extreme circumstances around poverty. I think coming up to this winter, a lot of people won't be having their gas safety checks done because they can't afford them. I think it costs around £86 to get your gas boiler serviced, and a lot of people are skipping that now. There's something around providing direct financial support to people to get safety checks done. It was interesting hearing about the fuel vouchers and offering direct financial support. I think there should be some sort of intervention with the Gas Safe Register, getting the plumbers who go out to do the checks

to actually refer people to get support for that. I am concerned that there is going to be a large number of people just avoiding that cost this year.” Energy consultant

- “As a DNO I’m working frontline with a lot of organisations. Whilst people are struggling to pay the bills, the first thing they’ll stop doing is paying for things like boiler servicing, and at £86, that’s probably pretty comparable to some of the emergency credit support that is given out. There’s an opportunity for utility organisations to look at how they are spending the funding.” Utility

4. Are there any emerging risks we should be aware of?

- “We’ve seen an increase in open fires being used with no thoughts about ventilation, as people are trying to reduce their use of gas, and that will be a big issue going forward.”
Emergency response
- “I wanted to raise awareness of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on behaviour change. The report showed that even those who knew about carbon monoxide risks would take the risks. So, I think working very closely with behaviour change specialists is very important with regard to the cost-of-living crisis, because people are driven into things they wouldn’t normally do.” Government
- “It’s really important to offer support around maintaining healthy boilers. More often than not, people will cut back on their boiler servicing when they are struggling financially. That really is one of the biggest threats to human life. Is there any funding available to help people get their boilers serviced, alongside all the CO awareness campaigns? I wonder whether vouchers could be offered to help towards the cost of boiler servicing?” Charity
- “Dangers of much lower levels of carbon monoxide, this hasn’t been highlighted previously and certainly wasn’t highlighted in the training we received, and it is quite alarming. The other point about the Cadent project, one of the things we promote is if people are on the PSR, or other categories, they can get the annual free gas inspection from the gas distribution network. I don’t think this is very well known, and whether this should be widened because it can prevent potential risk from boilers. Particularly with the current cost-of-living crisis, some might think it’s better to save on the annual boiler check, but this does reduce the risks.” Charity

➤ Has anything changed in recent times?

- “Our clients are buying secondary heating appliances and we are extremely concerned at increased carbon monoxide. This is right across Wales, but particularly in rural off-gas areas. This is especially true of Calor gas heaters.” Charity

5. Are there any similar projects you know about that we should be aware of?

- “I work on STEM projects, going into schools and talking to students about electricity safety, so I would like to see if there are any aspects of my projects that could overlap with any of your work.” Utility
- “Working with St John’s Ambulance around preventing cooking-related fires could also help to build CO awareness.” Emergency response
- “I want to flag a programme I manage called Empowered by Energy, specifically for people that are new to the United Kingdom. We work in partnership with organisations that support people, and what we’ve found is that by working in partnership with people that better understand local issues we can better support people. We are predominantly white, but that doesn’t mean that we aren’t aware of what we can deliver and build resilience within communities. From the feedback with communities we’ve worked with there is value out there.” Charity
- “I’m from the Royal Association for Deaf People and we’ve put a big effort into providing a service for deaf people. We’ve recognised a need for deaf people in carbon monoxide awareness. At least half of the people we surveyed didn’t know what it is. We’re just waiting to hear back from the VCMA. We’re also working with Yorkshire Water and the priority services register. We recognise that these groups are typically very hard to reach, and we’ve put a plan together which involves going to community centres and creating videos to help inform people.” Charity
- “We are working on a project with SSEN, doing a lot of talks with local organisations, and with the usual clients, doing talks about CO. We have a small supply of alarms we are going to be handing out as well.” Vulnerable customer representative

6. Would you/your organisation be amenable to working in partnership on projects of this nature?

- “We are keen to work in partnership with any group that could help us to promote the dangers of not being able to smell. I was at an event yesterday and both a woman and her carer said that they thought that she could smell damp, but when another carer came over, it turned out to be a gas leak. My concern is that people don’t seem to realise how to recognise that their sense of smell is going, so this is a really important area for raising awareness.” Charity
- “We have permission to do so, but I do think there’s a wider opportunity to connect the existing bits of infrastructure that are already here on carbon monoxide.” Charity

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- “Just to say as we run an energy project in Newcastle, carbon monoxide is not part of our script or something we highlight. We are not part of the Energy Advice project, so I don’t have access to the carbon monoxide monitors and packs. It would be helpful to have something to give out that would start that conversation. The presentation has really brought this into focus for us, but it isn’t something we highlight at the moment, but something that we should.” Charity
 - “Locally, we delivered the Safe and Warm project, it’s a difficult area for us to tap into. A big arm of this project is working with the NHS, as well as link workers and GPs, to deliver CO safety training to them in the hope they will work with vulnerable people, although I’m now wondering if we could work with VCMA as we have a countrywide network that’s already in place and ready to go. There needs to be more engagement with third-sector actors.” Charity
- **Are there any other organisations you can suggest?**
- “For me as a DNO and working with young people, we would be really interested in how we could maybe collaborate in a project like that across our region. We also work with the Girl Guides, we have a project called Girl Power, which is probably very similar. There are lots of activities around energy saving, vulnerability, safety etc. A collaboration of the two projects would be amazing.” Utility

SESSION 3: AFFORDABILITY OF ENERGY

During the presentation on affordability of energy, the stated ambition of the GDNs was to provide support and governance through awareness and coordination of activities associated with affordability and energy advice. It was acknowledged that energy prices had reached record highs and that the number of people in or at risk of fuel poverty was increasing sharply. It was explained that cold and damp homes adversely impact on people's health and wellbeing. The VCMA enabled GDNs to tackle fuel poverty and energy-related issues via projects that supported advice services around energy, income maximisation and behaviour change.

GDNs were doing this by creating sustainable partnerships in a trusted and expert way to deliver measurable outcomes for vulnerable households. The networks were working with partners to increase awareness and impact of the Fuel Poor Network Extension Scheme (FPNES) for those living in, or at risk of, fuel poverty. The presenters highlighted that the GDNs were linking up fuel poverty with wraparound/holistic service provision through VCMA projects. The GDNs were funding regional projects and learning from partners on how best to support local needs and, where appropriate, maximise opportunities to scale up nationally. The networks were also collaboratively funding national projects to reach target audiences more broadly and effectively. The projects showcased were as below:

- Fuel Poor Network Extension Scheme (FPNES)
- Citizens Advice – England and Wales
- Fuel Bank Foundation
- Home and Well
- Marches Energy Action (MEA) – Home Visits Project
- Healthy Homes Healthy People
- Foodbank project – linking food and fuel poverty

Stakeholders were then asked to provide their feedback on the showcased projects in the breakout rooms. There was a general consensus that the projects delivered value for customers. An academic stakeholder underlined the fact that it was important to consider how value was measured across the board. One charity stakeholder effusively praised the projects and called for a maintained focus on carbon monoxide. Another charity representative stressed that a holistic approach helped people and facilitated engagement. Foodbank project and Home and Well were identified as being especially valuable.

The issue of people cutting back on gas safety was flagged in the discussion. This was coupled with concerns about gaps in funding and people not coming forward to ask for help. Emergency services stakeholders emphasised the need for continued collaboration in order to support people and stressed that the projects were worthwhile. Charity and emergency services stakeholders expressed concern about people panicking and bypassing or tampering with their energy meters or using alternative and unsafe methods of heating their homes.

In terms of how GDNs could do more, charity stakeholders suggested that a focus on public and private tenants would be helpful. There were calls from business customers to engage with partners on data exchange. Collaboration with charity services such as Age UK was viewed as an avenue through which to replicate the success of Home and Well in rural areas. A research, development and technology group stakeholder proposed that a platform to help identify worst-served areas for support for vulnerable people could help with addressing the postcode lottery issue. One utility stakeholder called for funding to be brought forward in light of the urgent need because of rising fuel prices. Charity stakeholders also posited that free or subsidised CO alarms would be welcome, as people were less likely to spend money on them due to fuel poverty and the cost of living. Further to this, a vulnerable customer representative suggested that looking at benefits and taking a holistic approach with partners would be worthwhile, and that a change in messaging was required so that people would accept help.

Emerging risks raised in the discussion included people on pre-payment meters not budgeting for winter payments. Charity stakeholders also warned of a shift from credit-based systems to pre-payment meters. The raising of this by the community energy representative urged the GDNs to build a link between budgeting risks and how people paid for energy. Increased demand and the cost-of-living crisis meant that it was paramount to build the right support ecosystem. Partnerships were suggested regarding hospital discharge and vouchers for customers on pre-payment meters. Charities were open to partnering with more GDNs.

FEEDBACK

1. Do you think these projects deliver value for our customers?

- “They all sound great. However, there’s nothing here that is localised to us in Scotland. I’m sure there is work going on in Scotland, but it would be great to have some examples of this here.” Charity
- “Projects are brilliant, linking food and fuel poverty is excellent because by addressing food poverty, it allows us to address other issues and other harms. We’ve been doing breakfasts, so warm food for people, I’m shocked how many carbon monoxide alarms we’ve given out while doing this. No event advertising around that but we’ve sent out

around over 100 carbon monoxide alarms. Using the community assets and approaches are really valuable.” Charity

- “I think one really important thing they touched on is customers don’t really know where to turn to for support. Citizens Advice is great as not many people want to turn to their providers for help and guidance. That’s a really great partnership in terms of value for customers.” Charity
- “All of the projects add some value. I put a note in the chat during the Hospital-to-Home discussion, Home & Well. I used to sit on the board of Age UK, and they offer a similar service. My question is, does that project work with other bodies that provide a hospital-to-home service? There are a lot of them. It’s great that we have these projects, but it would be worth avoiding duplications and gaps.” Utility
- “Love them all, great initiatives, great social return on investment.” Charity

2. Are there any you’re particularly in favour of?

- “I think that the Foodbank project is good and it’s interesting that the spend is only £5000, but the outcomes achieved are huge. This is a really good example of how a little can go a long way. As a small charity, this is a wonderful prospect for us.” Vulnerability service provider
- “Wasn’t fully aware of the food/fuel poverty coming together. Impressed with that as it is new to me, these are the two biggest issues at the moment. I like it because they’re the two biggest issues at the moment. I agree that the holistic approach is the best approach because people come to organisations like ours with a particular issue and being able to give them the holistic support via these programmes is the best approach to support people in the widest way.” Charity
- “The Home and Well service should not be underestimated. 60% of people would choose to die at home rather than at hospital.” Charity
- “The Fuel Bank Foundation, linking up with them over the past 12 months or so, it’s been a huge step change for us in terms of the type of people we are assisting. We’ve always sought out people that are vulnerable, but we are seeing a huge new sector of people that have never been in this situation before and don’t really know how to seek assistance. We shouldn’t talk about ‘fuel poverty’ because it is just poverty as a whole. Poverty encompasses so many different aspects to it. We are trying to tailor our approach so that we are allowing people that don’t necessarily know where to seek support how to get help. We are trying to work with a whole raft of different people and the Fuel Bank Foundation have been really helpful in allowing us to set this project up.” Charity

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- “I absolutely love Home and Well. Connecting and finding people in vulnerable situations can be difficult and so this is a wonderful opportunity to make sure people are warm when they come home from hospital. When people are in hospital, they often rush to get home and they feel like their recovery will be quicker if they’re home so it’s very important to make sure their home is warm.” Utility

➤ **Are there any obvious gaps?**

- “People may be cutting back on gas safety with the cost-of-living crisis. I think something focusing on that would be good and to help those households.” Charity
- “The people who don’t come forward and ask for help – how do we reach them? There are people bypassing electricity meters and people cooking on camping stoves. For the fire service, this is becoming a bigger problem. We’ve got to keep working together to support people. All these projects are worthwhile.” Emergency services
- “The Fuel Bank Foundation are amazing but there’s a real gap for those on credit meters who are building up debts. There’s a lot of help out there for those on pre-payment meters, such as vouchers, but we mustn’t forget those on credit meters.” Charity
- “The Warmer Home Scheme is apparently no longer funding first-time central heating.” Charity
- “I agree about Home and Well. It would also be good to go into people’s homes when they come home from hospital and sort radiator panels or remove trip hazards. There are some issues I worry about, for example, where are people going to get a new gas boiler nowadays?” Charity

➤ **How can we quantify the social value they deliver?**

- “I think it comes down to how it’s measured, how it’s being measured across the board. I don’t know how much is captured.” Academic

3. Is there more we could be doing in this area?

- “I agree that there is a gap with housing tenants and would include public tenants in that group too. It can be a challenge getting support to people who are asset rich and cash poor, particularly with things like boiler replacements.” Charity
- “The Home and Well project is very effective for supporting vulnerable people. However, it is difficult to replicate in rural Scottish areas where services are more spread out. Working with other health and care services such as Age UK could help here.” Charity

- “They all have a positive social return on investment. I’m often asked about support for vulnerable people, and it all comes down to a postcode lottery. In some areas, the support is great, but not good elsewhere. A platform that would help you identify all these areas would help.” Research, development and technology group
- “I think the money could be used to provide free or subsidised CO2 alarms. People are not going to spend money this winter to buy them because of fuel poverty and the cost-of-living crisis.” Charity
- “There is a Citizen’s Advice scheme being rolled out in Scotland, and a big part of it is an integrated energy partnership with Energy Scotland. The Green Deal across Scotland is now defunct, but there was a massive amount of mis-selling, so customers are now very wary of scams. So, if we want to help people there has to be trust built in. That means working with trusted companies and sources and educating consumers on how they can find reputable suppliers.” Charity

4. Are there any emerging risks we should be aware of?

- “People on pre-payment meters don’t budget for winter energy payments as well as they could and there is also not a great deal of support for people on direct debit meters. Therefore, you need to build a link between budgeting risks and how people pay for electricity.” Community energy representative
- “I’ve spoken quite a lot about the problem with pre-payment meters. I think that just hearing the narrative behind them, it was the pre-payment meters that were part of the problem. And finding a solution for those who have to use them is important.” Government
- “Barbecues are a risk. People are using the disposable ones indoors, even though they aren’t exactly cheap. People are also using them in confined spaces to commit suicide, sadly, because of the CO that is emitted from them.” Emergency services
- “The increased numbers of self-disconnection we are seeing is a risk. When prices go up again in October, this number is going to increase hugely. We’re seeing people living in cold homes and the mental health problems this is causing, be it stress or anxiety. We’ve linked in with local welfare support schemes to try and get people help with food and fuel. Perhaps you could link in with these local initiatives.” Charity
- “The FPNES [Fuel Poor Network Extension Scheme] is tapering off to stop over the next couple of months, or years if we’re lucky. Two years ago, we were doing 150 vouchers a month. Last month we did nine vouchers, or nine applications. The problem with the scheme is that we’re trying to move away from a carbon economy and putting gas connections in doesn’t help with decarbonisation. There’s this battle between decarbonisation and fuel poverty. The easiest way to help people in fuel poverty is to give them a boiler that works in their property, but in the Welsh Government they’ve said that no new properties will have gas connections post-2025. How do we help people in fuel

poverty with decarbonisation? If all the DNOs are continuing to look at the FPNES, we need to find a way we can incorporate that into forward thinking, both with the Welsh government and the central government in Westminster.” Charity

➤ **Has anything changed in recent times?**

- “With the cost-of-living increases, even people who wouldn’t have particularly worried about fuel bills are now worried about them, and even people on a relatively decent income are expressing concern about how they’re going to pay their bills. And if that’s the case, then those who are poorer are going to be suffering very deeply now.” Charity
- “Something I’ve said quite often is not just seeing things work from one direction, but to try and get the GDNs to refer customers that they see as vulnerable to get medical help. So that healthcare providers understand that it is a referral from a trusted service.” Government

5. Are there any similar projects you know about that we should be aware of?

- “My organisation is involved in projects that could dovetail nicely into yours, particularly around services to help people be safe when they leave hospital, such as potential dangers with gas appliances. We also have a fuel poverty project which could help.” Charity
- “We’re working with a local Citizens Advice Bureau and looking to recruit a family link worker. We’ll be providing the energy advice for our part. We’re seeing a lot of issues with people disengaging and not following up with what us or the Citizens Advice Bureau need them to do. The family worker will be a direct point of contact who can tie everything together. More things like this would be really helpful.” Charity
- “We provide vouchers for prepaid meters. We’re working on a solution for credit customers and customers on smart meters. We hope that in the next few months that will come onstream.” Charity
- “I work at Age UK, and we are in the planning process of a partnership to access some funding, and we see that the biggest impact we can have is through benefits checks. Through that we identify around £2500 that older people could be claiming through various benefits that they are entitled to. That is the way that we can have the biggest impact on some of these issues. It’s very much not in isolation, a holistic approach would be best.” Charity
- “We run a slow-cooker project, and we had a slow-cooker day where we invited families, gave demos, showed them recipes they could make with ingredients they could get from the food banks,, and gave them a free slow cooker at the end. Slow cookers are so much more energy efficient than ovens.” Vulnerable customer representative

6. Would you/your organisation be amenable to working in partnership on projects of this nature?

- “Thumbs up about thinking about this.” Charity
- “I think the voluntary sector are opening the door. To not want to partner with such an innovative approach is a bit of a no-brainer for me. Are they engaging with all the hard-to-reach groups? For us we would be delighted to work in partnership with any of the other distributors.” Charity
- “We already partner with four GDNs, but we can always do more.” Charity
- “I’m happy to share the mapping we’ve done with Wales & West.” Charity
- “This has been beneficial to me as a GDN to hear this discussion.” Utility

➤ Are there any other organisations you can suggest?

- “It’s not just about particular points of poverty, but poverty in general. I have been working with the FPNES for the last 10 years now, and it is heart-breaking how much poverty is increasing. There are lots of partnerships out there and it’s fantastic that we are reaching out more. I feel like FPNES should be in the same awareness group as the COO and the PSR, to reach out to more people.” Community energy group
- “I’d like there to be more support for GPs, when people go to GPs with Tired All the Time, and it is a symptom of carbon monoxide and one of the things GPs could do is give out carbon monoxide alarms. Would be a good start to ruling out carbon monoxide as a danger.” Charity

SESSION 4: SUPPORT FOR PRIORITY CUSTOMERS

Before discussing collaborative projects, the presenters highlighted existing support available via the Priority Services Register (PSR). It was explained that the VCMA provided opportunities beyond interactions between GDNs and stakeholders. The networks' ambition was to create alignment & consistency around PSR awareness and safeguarding service(s) messaging that supported priority customer needs relevant to gas distribution networks. GDNs were setting out to create sustainable community projects and partnerships, to deliver mutually beneficial and fair outcomes while maximising effective reach. GDNs would collaboratively fund national projects with regional pilots (where successful), creating a blueprint opportunity for national extension. The projects showcased were as below:

- Disability Energy Services (DES)
- MyBnk – schools programme
- Age Scotland
- Energy Matters – Groundwork/Green Doctors
- Centres for Warmth
- PSR social media campaign

The outlook for Year 2 included:

- Marie Curie Cancer Care end-of-life support
- Maggie's Support for those living with cancer
- Royal Association for Deaf People accessibility
- Mental Health UK mental health support
- Age UK age-related support

Stakeholders were then asked to provide their feedback on the showcased projects in the breakout rooms. Stakeholders felt that the projects delivered great value for customers. One charity stakeholder praised the projects and explained that smaller charities could offer value and should not be overlooked in favour of national charities. A government stakeholder applauded the work of the GDNs, noting that the work needed to continue.

Centres for Warmth was singled out as a fantastic initiative by one vulnerability service provider. It was thought that families engaging with the project would result in more people spreading the word about it in their communities. There were also calls for Centres for Warmth to be rolled out nationally. Scope, Age UK, and MyBnk projects were picked out for special praise by the discussion groups for the tailored and effective support they offered. An academic stakeholder was very interested in the PSR social media campaign and eager to learn more about the strategy.

Green Doctors was favoured by charity stakeholders, who found that their local presence and engagement with customers were exemplary.

The need to identify different target groups and their needs was highlighted by a community energy stakeholder in the discussions. This was built on by charity representatives stressing the need for accessibility, whether through home visits or social media outreach. A versatile approach was favoured by participants in the breakout session. There were calls for a considered approach to digitally excluded customers, as well as to those experiencing language barriers.

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of GDNs forming the right partnerships and ensuring that these were truly adding value. There was a consensus that rising energy prices and the increasing cost of living represented a serious emerging problem that would put many people at risk. Charity representatives stated that the pandemic had had a major impact on the mental health of the general public, which would be exacerbated by financial troubles. Emergency services and charity participants believed that low-income homeowners could be missed.

Partnerships between NGN and WarmHub were brought to the attention of the networks. A project in Bolton which had an energy advisor working with a Somali group through recreational activities was highlighted. This allowed for building trust and engagement on rising energy prices and accessing support. Charity stakeholders also mentioned a working project to promote the PSR, which was in its early stages. According to one charity representative, social media campaigns had proved useful for reaching digitally excluded older people in rural areas via their neighbours. Stakeholders were amenable to collaboration with GDNs on projects and highlighted the need to drive PSR registrations through a collaborative approach. Charity stakeholders were particularly interested in funding and delivery partners for initiatives.

FEEDBACK

1. Do you think these projects deliver value for our customers?

- “There is great value across these projects and some fantastic work happening.” Charity
- “Like I’ve already said. Yes, is the answer. Sometimes there is a move towards national charities, but some of the smaller charities should not be underestimated. They have good knowledge and know how to roll it out effectively. But yes, good value for money.” Charity
- “This is about partnership working. Reaching the most vulnerable people requires utilising everybody’s skills and networks. There’s lots more that could be done in a more universal way to get this message out there, which is perhaps what was done with that social media campaign.” Charity

2. Are there any you're particularly in favour of?

- “The Centres for Warmth is a fantastic initiative, as a family would definitely engage with that. As a result, more and more people would spread the word about it in their communities.” Vulnerability service provider
- “I think the Scope project is fantastic. It's designing support specifically for a group in need. A lot of the advice isn't tailored to your personal circumstance and tailoring that advice is really powerful.” Charity
- “The Age UK is very much in step with what I do, looking at it holistically, coming at things from all angles, benefit checks, which looks brilliant to me.” Vulnerable customer representative
- “Again, I really like the MyBnk school programmes, as it's really important to invest in educational pieces. Schools are a really good place to engage with caregivers and parents, which is something that we have been doing in Manchester.” Charity
- “The project where they were doing the PSR stuff on social media. That would be useful to know, if they could let us have access to that strategy that would be great.” Academic

➤ Are there any obvious gaps?

- “When rolling out the different initiatives, you need to identify the different groups that you intend to target and their different needs. Then you need to identify the different entry points to get them onto the schemes. For example, if you solely went for schools, you would miss people who do not have children.” Community energy representative
- “I think that accessibility is really important: some people do need the home visits, but some people will engage through social media.” Charity
- “We need to make sure individuals are aware of these schemes. Often the most vulnerable people have so many barriers it's impossible for them to access these schemes, so we all need to make sure we can all be critical friends to each other. This includes for example people who speak English as a second language, the digitally excluded, people who baulk if they get a knock on the door. So, we need to make sure we target people appropriately.” Charity
- “In the past we've helped people switch, but at the moment we can't even switch people to economy 7 or 10 because they aren't available. There are lots of people switching from oil or solid fuel to a modern storage heater, but they can't access those rates and that's a massive deal.” Local authority officer

3. Is there more we could be doing in this area?

- “I would reiterate that you need to work to find the gaps to ensure that hard-to-reach groups are not missed.” Community energy representative

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- “Inspired, just want to say thanks for the presentation. Keen to learn more about the MyBnk scheme that SGN are running. We want to provide an activity book to children; we just give them a home safety checklist at the moment, but we feel we can do more to embed the learning by doing a bigger activity book. Want to go to Wales & West to help this happen.” Charity
 - “Yes, the projects have to be as diverse as our communities.” Charity
 - “I think one of the areas I’ve not seen any work, is around SEND families. There are loads of challenges around working with families, especially around the wider impact of a difficult education. For example, an alarm could be quite interesting to an autistic child. I just feel like those SEND families are forgotten.” Charity
 - “We work quite hard within Wales to make sure that Welsh Water, Wales & West Utilities, and WPD share the PSR that they manage between the three DNOs, so that people aren’t missed out. It doesn’t make sense to me that there are so many PSRs around the UK. The utilities hold them, the DNOs hold them, surely it would be better to have all the DNOs work together, have one central database where it’s all held in one place, so then they can be filtered out to local authorities if there’s an emergency. That way we don’t miss anybody. Some people sit on one PSR, but they may be missing on another. That information is not flowing.” Charity

4. Are there any emerging risks we should be aware of?

- “Time is a big risk, as at the end of this year we need the services in place to be effective this coming winter. We’re already almost in August, and so in the next few months we need to be getting that message out there about the energy crisis and how to pay your bills.” Charity
- “Fuel poverty, and that people cannot afford to get their appliances properly serviced and their chimneys swept. We are great movers on prevention and that is what is so hard to get this message across and the funding for it.” Charity
- “I manage a mental health service. Research shows the pandemic had a major impact on the mental health of the general public, and a disproportionate impact on people with mental health issues who are also struggling with their finances.” Charity
- “I think there is a massive risk coming up with this winter, as I’ve already said, about CO2 alarms. The other issue is homeowners. Are these campaigns targeting homeowners? They’re targeting vulnerable groups, but how many of them are homeowners? Homeowners are being left out of the equation. They will not be able to pay their bills or service their appliances, making them even more vulnerable. That also has consequences for those living next door if CO2 leaks through the walls.” Charity

➤ **Has anything changed in recent times?**

- “Scope don’t operate in Scotland at the moment, but this might change. That’s not to say we wouldn’t support customers in Scotland. It’s important to reiterate that when we launched this disability energy service in February 2021, a lot of people were concerned about their fuel bills – how they could better manage them and pay them. What we’ve seen since April is actual safeguarding issues arising. It’s not just a case of people struggling to pay anymore. The cost-of-living crisis is affecting people in every single way, mentally and physically. At Scope, we’ve got a responsibility to safeguard people.” Charity
- “From our experience, people are just struggling with the day-to-day expenses. We do foodbank referrals as well as fuel referrals, but people are even struggling to heat their food. There’s so much stress for people – financial, mental, and so on. People are in really tough situations.” Charity
- “TikTok can be great for getting information out there, but it can also be a massive spreader of myth. For example, I recently saw a video of someone showing people how to fry an egg by holding a pan over 10 tealights if they can’t afford to run their cooker, and that had five million views, so we need to get into that gap and fill it with accurate information.” Charity

5. Are there any similar projects you know about that we should be aware of?

- “We’ve been working in partnership with Northern Gas Network since it started, and we’re very proud of it, it’s a really successful programme. And we’re continually trying to think of how we can increase support, because it’s needed more than ever at the moment. We also work a lot with Citizen’s Advice in West Yorkshire, and we’ve just started working with Sheffield to cover South Yorkshire area. So, making sure that the service is covering all the areas, especially income maximisation, energy-saving advice, just trying to upscale the support as much as we can at the moment.” Utility
- “WarmHub, some interesting ways of looking at raising CO awareness in rural communities that can be utilised in more areas.” Charity
- “We recently worked with an organisation over in Bolton, who were working with a Somalian group, and they actually had an energy advisor that did recreational activities with them. It was when they got together that they would then use that opportunity to address things like rising energy prices, access to help etc., but with a very trusted partner, and trusted partners in the environment that they feel comfortable in. That provides really valued results. I think it’s really important that people keep that within the forefront of their minds and be innovative in the ways that they think and promote ideas.” Charity
- “There is a national working party at the moment, which is actually looking at linking up PSRs. Most organisations, most utilities, share data. So, we have a data-share agreement with United Utilities. The gas companies sign people on to the PSR, but they don’t have a

PSR, and then forward that to the relevant DNO, who then shares with water. All of that is currently ongoing but it's very primitive in terms of where we could be. The national project will hopefully be the future of what the PSR will look like, but that'll be another workshop as well." Charity

- "When we talk about digital exclusion we tend to think of older people. During the pandemic we ran social media campaigns, because that was the only thing we could do, and we put posts out asking people if they knew of any neighbours or family members without internet access who they could take responsibility for keeping them informed. Rural communities that are close-knit can be especially hard for outsiders to communicate with, so social media still has a place." Charity

6. Would you/your organisation be amenable to working in partnership on projects of this nature?

- "We've got very similar priorities, and even where they're slightly different, we're happy to work together. Raising awareness about priority services is one of our main areas." Utility
- "We have a big campaign going out this autumn with Scope. We are looking for help from partners with food vouchers or food parcels." Charity
- "We started collaborating with SGN. We're now extending our discussions with SSEN, SPEN and Scottish Water. We've been working on social media campaigns on keeping people hydrated during the hot weather, for example. We'd like to do something collaboratively for the whole of Scotland, especially given the next price increase in October. We are absolutely open to offers. We're looking at how we can best introduce the referral programme. We'd like to extend this beyond the energy companies to include partners like the Fire and Rescue Service." Charity
- "If anyone had any ideas of where we could get more funding, that'd be great. We're really desperate at Scope to have more partners and work on more initiatives. We'd like more funding and delivery partners, too." Charity
- "I think it will be really good to look at how we could share best practice as well, because there's quite a lot of learning that we can share with each other. I'd love to be able to find out how best we could go about that." Vulnerable customer representative

APPENDIX 1: Q&A

A Q&A was held following the afternoon webinar. The questions asked are shown below.

1. Do you agree with our approach to quantifying SROI?

“Are the SROI calculation methods common to all GDNs? Does Cadent have a different way of dealing with it compared to WWU, for example?”

- “We have performed a review on our models and have challenged each other, but we’re broadly the same. The electricity networks are putting models into their ED2 delivery plans, which are being reviewed by OFGEM right now, so these learnings will be useful. We won’t necessarily end up with the same end model though.” Nigel Winnan, WWU

“Is there a way to share SROI models so that other stakeholders can use them to put together their own schemes?”

- “Work was done to build these models and stakeholders wanted to see them so that they can use them to demonstrate a social return before they submit their own applications. NGN is happy to share the toolkits.” Eileen Brown, NGN

“There’s a heavy underspend by half across Year 1 with SROIs. Why? Do all companies intend to maximise their spend beyond that?”

- “It’s been a slow start, as engagement has been needed around the projects and our procurement team has had to learn a lot of new things. In addition, OFGEM upped their pot from £30m to £60m. Lots of money came out at the end of Year 1 and that will be part of a phased spend, which will continue to crank up. We also now have money committed to new projects for Year 2. So, rest assured: everyone is committed to spending on these projects.” Nigel Winnan, WWU

CHAT QUESTIONS:

- “Do all the GDNs use different SROI models? Are the SROIs comparable between companies? And which model do you use for collaborative projects?”
- “To clarify, are the SROI methodologies used by companies the same across all companies? I.e., are numbers in company reports comparable?”
- “Could GDNs share the SROI model and train partners to be able to use it?”
- “If the SROI models are similar, why might it take a while to move to a common model?”

2. Are there any other tools or models we should be aware of?

- “Talking to my colleagues, we realised that there is a huge need for customer support which could be independent of the GDNs but funded by them (as per the Advertising Standards Authority). Such a body could have different sections; e.g., homeowners, tenants, survivors of CO etc.”

3. Questions and answers:

“Do you all use the same carbon monoxide alarms?”

- “The branding is different, but they are broadly the same.” Phil Burrows, Cadent

“Have GDNs mapped vulnerable customers in order to capture key audiences?”

- “We do have different tools to ascertain which are the right products and services for audiences. We also share these tools with partners.” Jo Giles, Cadent

“Is there a central referral system for getting people to the best support point, or is there an appetite for one?”

- “Cadent has one that maps charity schemes and allows charities to make direct referrals. Having one central point that everyone could use would be a great idea.” Jo Giles, Cadent

“Some of my vulnerable clients have not been looked after by customer service representatives. One has had her gas cut off twice. How can this be improved?”

- “Please contact us if this happens and we’ll look into this and provide support. We want to make sure that every interaction truly counts. We also have private contacts with suppliers who can smooth things out.” Jo Giles, Cadent

“It’s great that GDNs are doing so much, but where are the HSE and gas suppliers?”

- “GDNs are working with suppliers to raise awareness of how we can work together. Some are more open, but others less so.” Phil Burrows, Cadent

“What is the rationale for not including LEDs and similar efficient technologies in the VCMA, as they can save money for vulnerable customers?”

- “We cannot include them in the methodology at present. We can just give advice rather than measures.” Phil Burrows, Cadent
- “OFGEM is keen for VCMA not to replicate current schemes, but we will lobby OFGEM if customers want it.” Eileen Brown, NGN

“If we are in receipt of VCMA funding, can we bid for further funding? If so, is the application period running?”

- “No projects are off the table, provided that they meet the eligibility criteria. There is also no limit on the amount of funding that you can apply for.” Jill Walker, NGN

“More and more customers are being referred to the PSR: how will the industry cope with providing this support and how will it remain bespoke with the numbers being so high?”

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- “We’re always planning for different eventualities with the PSR, so it’s a very embedded approach. Of course, we need to make sure that certain chronic needs codes are prioritised, but we also need to ensure that each interaction is beneficial.” Jo Giles, Cadent

“How are projects selected for VCMA? How do you ensure that they meet your strategy? How do you ensure a good spread?”

- “We don’t openly invite people to bid for VCMA funding and look within our footprint using data about which partner may help us with these vulnerability initiatives.” Maureen McIntosh, SGN
- “We have a steering group that points us in the right direction about the best organisation for meeting different vulnerable groups’ needs. We do also have channels for stakeholders to come to us of course. The main aim is finding the right solution.” Kerry Potter, SGN
- “We use our data, and our vulnerability mapping tools. We also look at gaps and our geography to select projects moving forward that will deliver social benefit.” Jill Walker, NGN
- “Steering groups and collaborative working across GDNs have helped us to work together to deliver national and regional schemes, which is a source of pride for us.” Kerry Potter, SGN

“Is there a collective list of projects that can be accessed? This would be useful in helping us to find suitable work templates and establish partnerships.”

- “The main report that we have just released is the best place to start for now, but we would like to have a list.” Nigel Winnan, WWU

“Where companies are advertising grant funding through the VCMA, what proportion are unsuccessful and why?”

- “A very small number are unsuccessful. We look at whether projects align with our objectives and work with partners to tweak their projects to fit them. One recent project that failed was for a playpark that just didn’t work within our criteria, but we told them that we would work with them in future.” Jill Walker, NGN
- “When we say no, we will signpost them to a different funding stream within our own network or with our partners. We want to help them on their way in the next stage of their project with or without us.” Eileen Brown, NGN
- “We also work with partners to tweak their projects if they just don’t fit. The two recent ones that failed for us were top-up gas central heating systems and a project focusing on improving air quality in a local area.” Nigel Winnan, WWU

“How are you reflecting the PSR work done by DNOs in their ED2 plans? How are you ensuring that there isn’t duplication of effort and spend?”

-
- “We work with DNOs and keep each other in the loop around their work, so there is a lot of co-creation and co-development. We are not working in silos and are looking to take a whole approach around this.” Jo Giles, Cadent
 - “Here in Scotland, it is easier to put together a single PSR scheme compared to England and Wales, as there are fewer companies, and the regulations are different. We do work with the DNOs in Scotland and are transparent about what is working and what is not working, as well as opportunities for development.” Kerry Potter, SGN
 - “We have worked recently with WPD about the messaging around the PSR and providing smart data schemes. Some immediate work has spun out of that.” Nigel Winnan, WWU

“With people signing up to PSR, do you investigate how people sign up and what are the best routes for targeting potential signups?”

- “We have got projects in flight with partners to ensure that the different barriers that people could face are removed.” Jo Giles, Cadent
- “I agree, it’s not a one-size-fits-all approach. When working with people with dementia or hearing disabilities, we have a range of representatives for example. We work with utilities colleagues to ensure that there are not any gaps.” Kerry Potter, SGN
- “We also work with partners to get insight about the best messaging routes.” Jo Giles, Cadent

“Research shows that during Covid, people with mental health hardship were more prone to financial hardship. How are you dealing with this now? And how are you planning to deal with it in future?”

- “We are currently rolling out better training for customer services and a dedicated energy advisory tool. We’ve a pilot focusing on this in place within the Mental Health UK framework for six months and it’s delivering good results. We are also talking to Citizens’ Advice about learning deeper skills around helping people with mental health issues and trying to create new partnerships. We are also sharing learnings from this. The intention is to apply them at a national level, either through our own schemes or through partners.” Kerry Potter, SGN

“You’ve discussed issues around the procurement department struggling with dealing with services, rather than a product, for VCMA’s. Please work with colleagues to make the application process easier. Have you thought about how you can make the process easier to not disadvantage small organisations in particular?”

- “We are slimming the process down and are removing lots of requirements, as we were aware that we were getting fewer from smaller companies. We still want some key information of course, but we think that the process is good now and are alleviating the concerns expressed by small companies.” Nigel Winnan, WWU

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- “This is something that we’ve all had to learn, particularly around onboarding processes. However, the procurement team is now getting used to things and the process is working better.” Maureen McIntosh, SGN

“Would an organisation that raised awareness about the effects of carbon monoxide poisoning be eligible for funding?”

- “The answer is possibly, but we would need to have a deeper conversation with you.” Phil Burrows, Cadent

“Would you be willing to provide case studies about the effects of carbon monoxide on health and wellbeing to the COMED? Would you be amenable to giving a presentation at an event about this?”

- “Yes, and that applies to anyone. We are keen to spread the word.” Eileen Brown, NGN

“With the problems being experienced by vulnerable people, would you be able to contact the housing ministers to get housing improvements in place to ensure that houses can be run healthily? Retrofitting is a key example that comes to mind.”

- “The Welsh Government recognises that this is key, but also that fuel poverty is a priority. Our role should be linking people up with the appropriate schemes to support this.” Nigel Winnan, WWU
- “We can take the learnings and outcomes from these kinds of signposting projects and now need to apply them and share them to others. We shouldn’t just use partners for this and should look to housing representatives and mental health services, for example, too.” Eileen Brown, NGN

“How was today’s event advertised?”

- “We used the list of contacts provided by the GDNs, but also advertised it through LinkedIn.” James Garland, EQ Communications

“How do you agree on funding and on who gets what in your collaborative projects?”

- “There is an agreed strategy within the working group, and everyone looks for ways about how to achieve this approach. With the cost-of-living crisis, we need to do something different. We also have discussions with the steering group about the project and either amend or deliver it as necessary. In short, these projects emerge out of a co-creation approach with a shared goal shaped by a governance process.” Kerry Potter, SGN
- “Our steering group helps to shape these projects. We also have a range of options which provide interim options around different funding levels, meaning that we can step up if needed.” Nigel Winnan, WWU

“What are each GDN’s key learnings from the VCMA’s for Year 1? What went well and what could have gone better?”

-
- “For NGN, the strategic partner framework worked well in Year 1, as our partners have helped us to understand the needs of our different areas and the people living in them. One of our goals is to create projects that last beyond the end of the funding period, and it took us a long time to ascertain how we could do that.” Eileen Brown, NGN
 - “We were a little naïve and thought that people would come rushing to us, rather than us needing to prod them slightly. I’m quite proud at how we’ve adapted to this new aspect of our business, particularly around customer services and message spreading. We’re now seeing more partner work and increased referrals.” Nigel Winnan, WWU
 - “The key learning has been around procurement methods, but we now have excellent relationships and practices in place. There has been really great collaboration between networks about the projects that need to be devised, which has meant that so much has been delivered already. For Year 2, we want to keep building on these strong foundations and do our best to make a difference out there.” Maureen McIntosh, SGN
 - “The aspect that worked well for us is our ability to work with large partners and small regional partners. We have been agile and got to the root of problems in local communities and know their people and problems. Our key learning has been around the procurement process and trying to influence our legal teams on working with small organisations and giving them simple contracts. To build on things for next year, there needs to be more collaborative work between GDNs in order to deliver value to local communities.” Phil Burrows, Cadent

CHAT QUESTIONS:

- “Is there an agreed leaflet about CO that is used by all the GDNs?”
- “It’s great that the GDNs and Ofgem are doing so much but where are the gas suppliers and the appliance manufacturers? Where is the HSE?”
- “Some of my clients are PSR registered and have not been properly looked after by their energy companies’ advisers. One woman has had her gas cut off twice. How can this be improved?”
- “There has been a mix of regional and national partners that DNOs are working with. What preference do DNOs have in terms of working with regional or national partners? Are there particular regional areas DNOs are looking to cover?”
- “This may be a question which is more suited to the Fuel Bank Foundation directly, but currently prepayment vouchers are £30 in summer months and £49 in winter months. Now we know energy bills are going to be increasing hugely again, is there scope to look at increasing those voucher amounts to support customers staying connected with their energy?”

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- “Have the GDNs mapped the characteristics of vulnerable customers in order to inform targeting of key audiences?”
 - “What’s the rationale for energy efficiency measures such as LEDs, draught-proofing, reflective panels etc. not to be included in VCMA funding, given that many vulnerable customers can benefit, keep warmer & save money?”
 - “Does a central referral system already exist for networks to refer vulnerable customers to the best support, or would there be appetite for the development of one?”
 - “Why are there no people of colour in your advertising or in your senior management team?”
 - “Given the national coverage of the DNOs, is there an opportunity to push/lobby government/energy suppliers to take action on reducing or waiving the standing charge for the most vulnerable? Such a chance to be a positive ‘lead’ in corporate social responsibility.”
 - “Generally speaking, there is clearly a heavy underspend in Year 1 by roughly half across all companies. What is the cause of this for each company? Do all companies intend to maximise their pot of money (and if so, how?), or is the intention to underspend?”
 - “Other than leaflets and the short film, how are you reaching marginalised communities?”
 - “How much of the UIOLI allowance has been unspent?”
 - “Something that came up in the breakout room this morning. We are now seeing large numbers of “new” vulnerable customers who will rightly be referred to the PSR. How will the industry handle this influx and how will it be able to continue to make the PSR bespoke and manageable when numbers are so high?”
 - “When travelling communities are reluctant to have personal details recorded, how best can we record the help given to them, given they are a target group for some of the projects?”
 - “If we are in receipt of funding currently for a VCMA pilot project, can we put in for another bid for another, different project? If so, when does the next round of applications start, or is it rolling?”
 - “Research shows that during the Covid crisis people with mental health problems faced a much higher risk of financial hardship compared to the wider population and were more than twice as likely to have relied on credit or borrowing to cover everyday spending, e.g., heating.”
 - “How do you, or how may you in the future, proactively identify customers who may be struggling with mental health, and improve the support on offer?”
 - “With the problems being seen in people’s homes through the GDN work, could we consider engaging with the housing minister, APPG on healthy homes to help etc. with retrofit and the building of homes that function more economically to improve health and wellbeing holistically?”

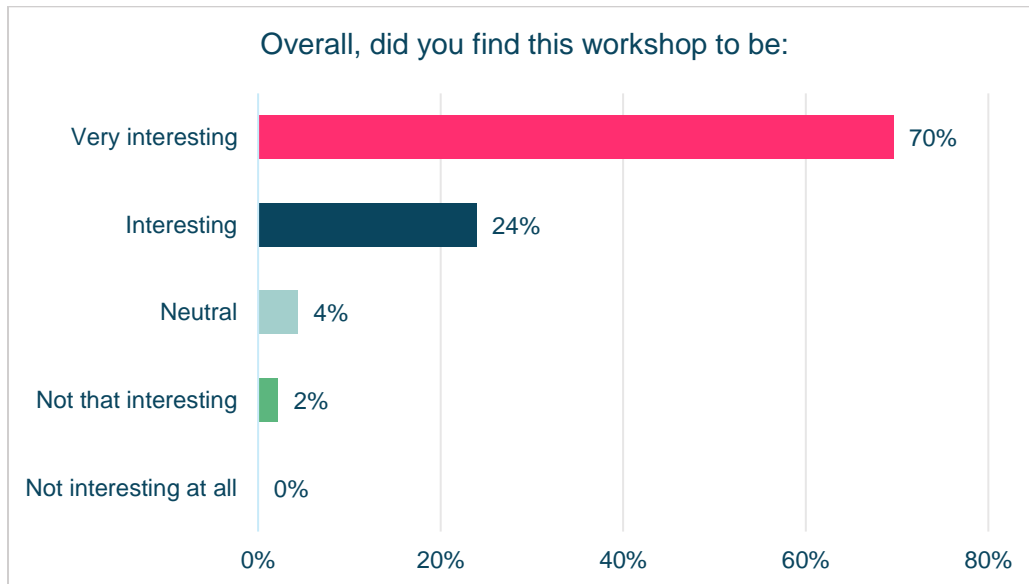
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- “This year especially CO alarms are going into private rented properties and social housing, unfortunately homeowners have no legal requirement to install CO alarms in their properties or have appliances serviced. This is a massive omission on safety. Please explain what is being done to tackle this; also because of fuel poverty it is more likely homeowners will not buy alarms or service appliances.”
 - “How are GDNs performing against their business plan commitments? Some have included this information in their annual report, some have not.”
 - “How are each of the GDNs selecting projects to receive VCMA funding? How do you ensure there is a good balance of projects, and that they align with your strategies and what your stakeholders want?”
 - “The term ‘impossible to reach’ was used in a presentation today; can you please tell us who they are?”
 - “Where companies are advertising grant funding provided by VCMA, what proportion of applications are unsuccessful and what common causes are there?”
 - “What are the main outcomes expected from SGN's VCMA administration project?”
 - “Is there a collective list of all the projects and information about them that can be accessed? Be useful in terms of replicating good work in other areas and in joining up partnership and collaborative working.”
 - “Have you got any survivors of CO or any representatives of a body that provides specific support to those who have been exposed to CO on your steering group?”
 - “How are GDNs reflecting in their PSR work and targets the proposals set out by DNOs for ED2 to ensure this is not undue duplication of effort and spend?”
 - “What processes are in place to consider whether activities could be considered corporate social responsibility or complemented by corporate social responsibility where shareholder funding could be used?”
 - “Will reviews take place to understand which routes of increasing PSR sign-up are most effective?”
 - “Would setting up an organisation for those who think they could have been exposed to CO to find the source of the CO, and if CO is found, the PPM of CO given to the survivor for their medics, be eligible for funding?”
 - “How does ‘Think CO’ through Gas Safe Charity fit it with the GDNs and VCMA?”
 - “How do you develop and agree on funding for collaborative projects?”
 - “How was today's workshop advertised? Was it invite-only to existing partners, or have you tried to reach a wider group of stakeholders?”
 - “Does the mental health person who has just spoken try to make sure the mental health problem hasn't been caused by CO?”
 - “What is the typical length of a VCMA project? Can projects be extended after a 'review' milestone without a further application for funding?”

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- “What are each GDN's key learnings from Year 1 where things went less well, and what actions will they take to improve in Year 2 and beyond?”

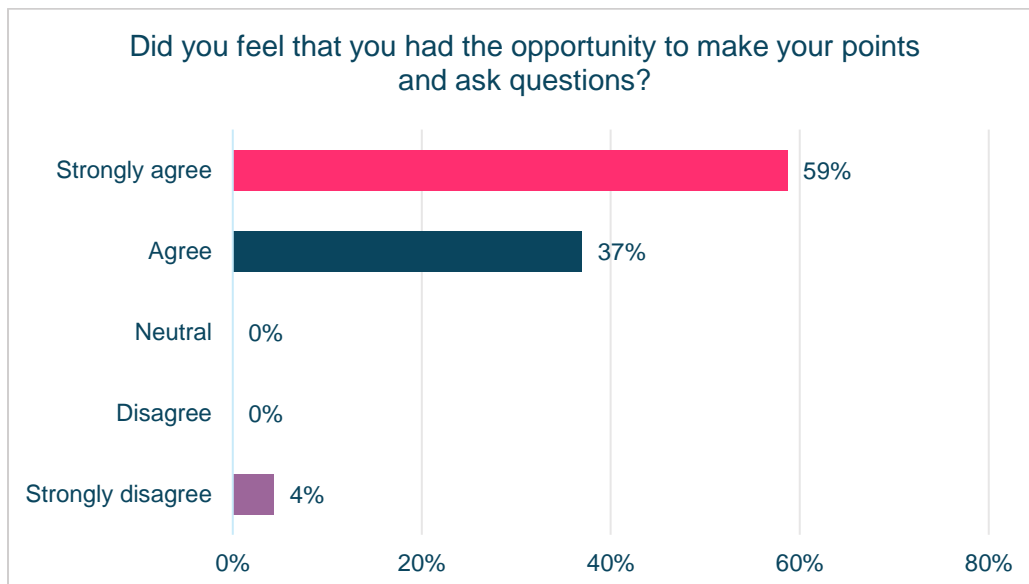
APPENDIX 2: WORKSHOP FEEDBACK

After the workshop, stakeholders were asked to complete a short feedback form. Some of the key findings are shown below.

Overall, did you find this workshop to be:

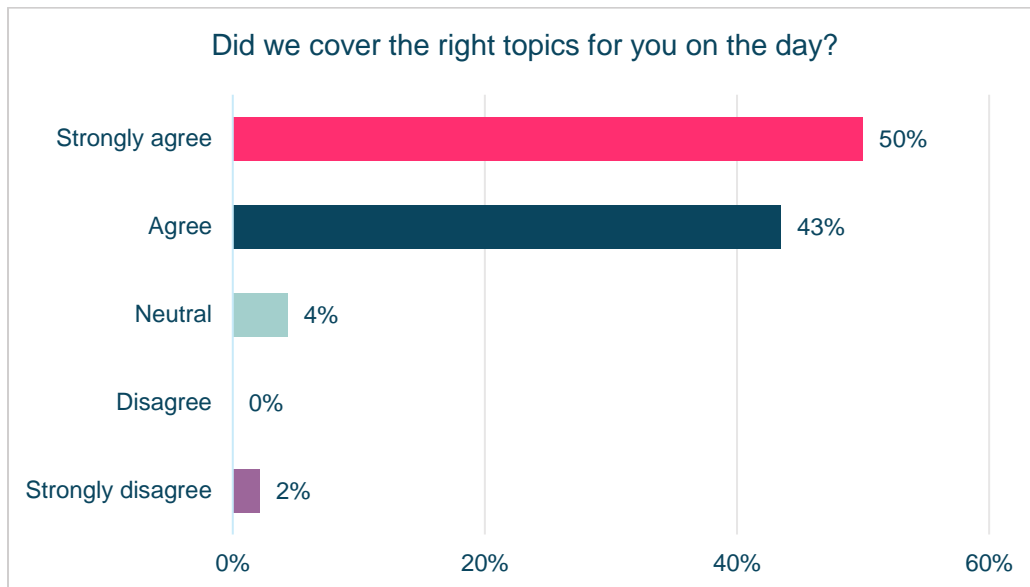


Did you feel that you had the opportunity to make your points and ask questions?



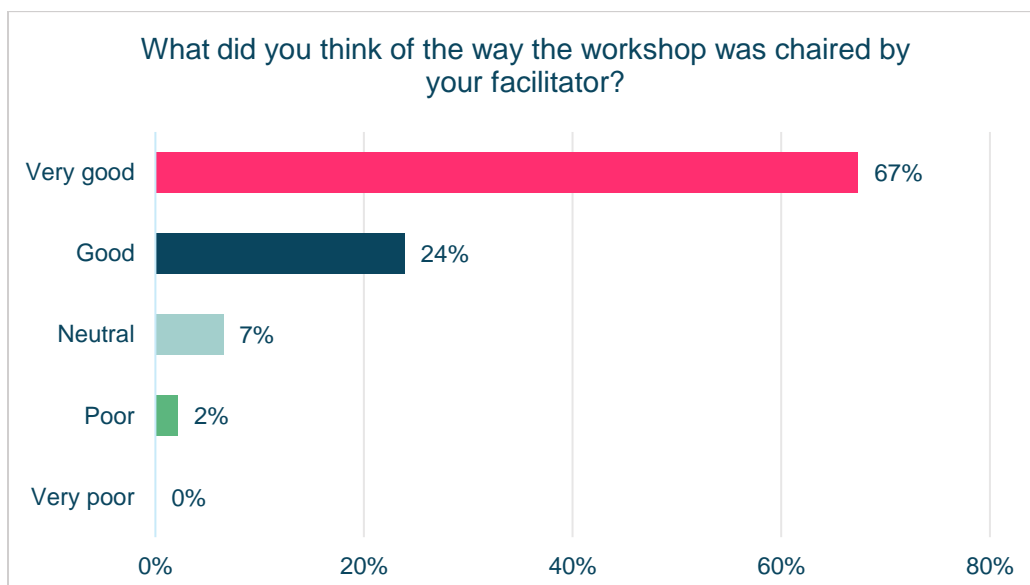
- “Regular opportunities for discussion in the breakout rooms were helpful.”
- “Breakout rooms not overly big, which I feel helps give everyone time to ask questions and give feedback.”
- “Well-managed breakouts with the right amount of time to make points.”

Did we cover the right topics for you on the day?



- “Excellent topic selection, something for everyone.”
- “It covered far more than I was expecting!”

What did you think of the way the workshop was chaired by your facilitator?



- “Excellent Room 3 facilitator, kept to time, listened and prompted where needed.”
- “He was very good.”
- “Great facilitator.”
- “Really well organised.”
- “Works well but it would be great to do a face-to-face next year – opportunity to meet and network with other partner organisations would be really good.”
- “Very seamless move into breakout rooms, interactive as well.”

- **Do you have any other comments?**

- “Found the workshop really useful and informative and really pleased I attended.”
- “A great session and proud to be involved.”
- “Very interesting. I linked up with a couple of other people as a result of my attendance which will be very helpful in future. Many thanks, I look forward to the next session.”
- “This was a brilliant event, I really enjoyed hearing about the projects and have lots of ideas for enhancing our current educational programmes. Thanks to everyone involved!”
- “Very well organised and interesting to hear all about the projects going on. Thank you.”
- “Best-managed virtual event I have attended for some time.”

APPENDIX 3: ATTENDEES

A total of 87 attendees from 64 different organisations attended the workshop; the organisations are shown below.

Age Scotland	Greener Kirkcaldy
Anglian Water	Groundwork UK
Asthma + Lung UK	Groundwork Yorkshire
Auriga Services	Harvey Girls
BAME Voices	Heavenly Group
Blackpool Coastal Housing	Highfield Food Co op
Bonanza Creative	iPiP
Cadent Gas	Lake District Foundation
Care & Repair Cymru	Lifeskills Safety Education Centre
Care City C.I.C.	Marie Curie
Ceredigion Citizens Advice	Mentone Energy Consultancy Ltd
Changeworks	Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council
Charis	National Energy Action
Citizens Advice Dumfries & Galloway	NEA
Citizens Advice Dundee	Northern Gas Networks
Citizens Advice East Ayrshire	Northern Powergrid
Citizens Advice Manchester	Ofgem
Citizens Advice Newcastle	Partnerships For Good Ltd
Citizens Advice Scotland	Pembrokeshire FRAME
CO-Gas Safety	Policy Connect
Communitas Energy CIC	Portsmouth Water Ltd
DEG	Scope
Derbyshire Fire and Rescue service	Scottish Water
Devon & Somerset Fire and Rescue Service	SFRS
Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service	Sia Partners
Durham County Council	SP Energy Networks
East Suffolk Council	The Katie Haines Memorial Trust
Electricity Northwest	The Royal Association for Deaf people
Extra Help Unit, Citizens Advice Scotland	UK Power Networks
Fifth Sense	Warm Wales
Fuel Bank Foundation	Warmworks
Gas Safe Charity (Think CO)	Yorkshire Energy Doctor CIC



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