

A black and white photograph of a person sitting in a motorized wheelchair on a set of stairs. The person is wearing a dark vest over a striped shirt and light-colored trousers. The wheelchair has a large front wheel and a smaller rear wheel. The background shows the concrete steps and metal railings of the staircase.

Supporting Vulnerable Customers

Research commissioned by
Wales & West Utilities

October 2018

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Executive Summary

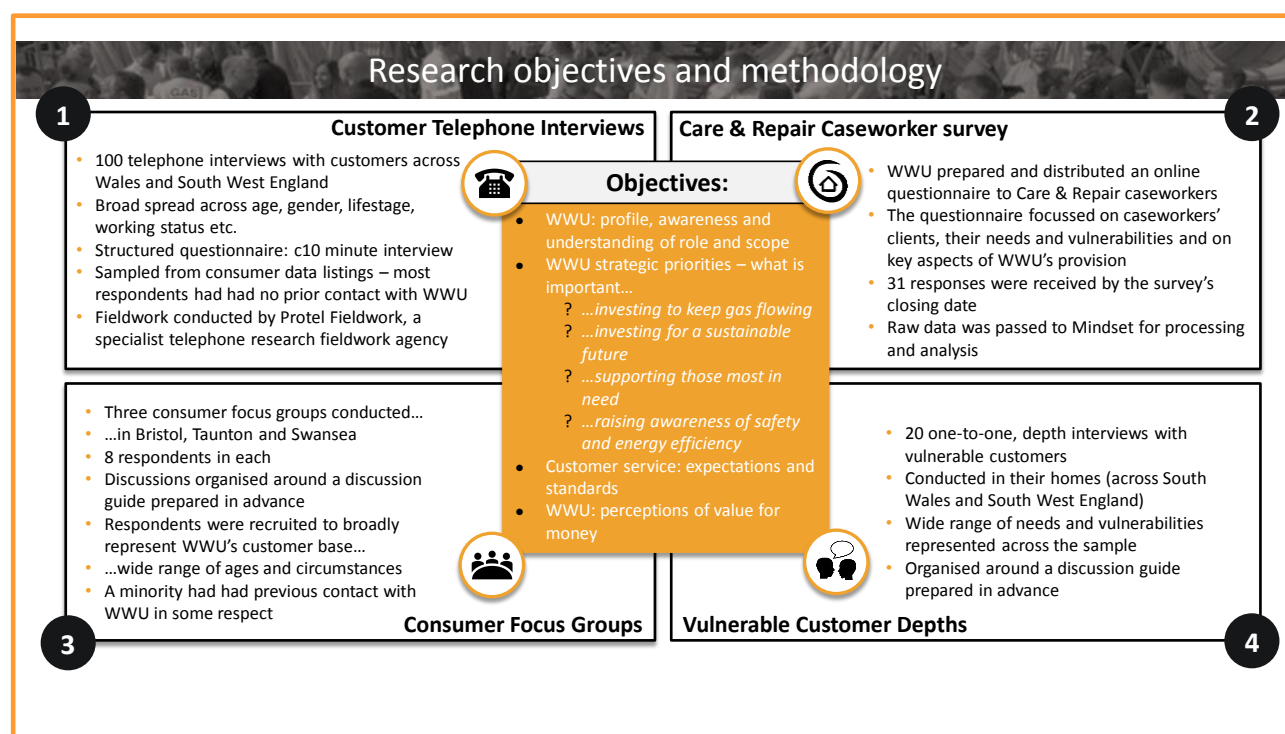
- This report is based primarily on a series of **20 in-depth interviews conducted with vulnerable customers**. The findings of these interviews were augmented by inputs from other research conducted as part of the overall programme: telephone interviews and focus groups with WWU customers and an online survey of Care & Repair Caseworkers.
- The nature of WWU's operations and responsibilities means that most people either engage with WWU infrequently or not at all. Consequently, awareness of WWU is unsurprisingly low and, as a result, **individuals in potentially vulnerable situations and circumstances do not generally know about the provisions in place to support priority customers**. This lack of awareness certainly extends to the PSR.
- Self-evidently, to support vulnerable individuals, WWU needs to be able to identify them and, on the basis of this research, **a top priority must be to take further steps towards raising the profile of the PSR amongst those who need to know**.
- Another key finding is that **emotional vulnerability – often linked to other more visible and tangible vulnerabilities – represents a key area of focus**. In particular, customers suffering from often complex physical and circumstantial vulnerabilities tend to be more susceptible to emotional vulnerability and anxiety.
- **Anxiety about the prospect of disruption (due to planned or emergency WWU work) is as important an issue to address as vulnerabilities relating to the work itself**. It is therefore critical that communications ahead of, during (and even after) WWU work are carefully planned and managed.
- Our research has also highlighted the extent to which people of all types – including those with and without accepted vulnerabilities – believe that **priority groups within the broader 'vulnerable customer' category must be identified**.
- Those with chronic illness and disability, often coupled with old age, are believed to be a priority group by most. However, **if these individuals also live alone (especially if a local support network of family or friends is lacking) the degree of vulnerability is significantly heightened**.
- Respondents – who were largely unaware of the measures WWU has in place to support priority customers – were almost **unanimously in agreement that WWU goes to surprising lengths to ensure the most vulnerable are supported** (once current measures had been outlined to them). Furthermore, many of the measures in place were seen as being appropriate for their own circumstances and something they would like to take advantage of should the need arise.

- On this basis, raising the profile of the PSR amongst the potentially vulnerable must be seen as a key priority for WWU. Taking account of the insights gained from this programme of research, **it is suggested that WWU should also consider addressing the following as a priority:**
 - **Raise PSR profile:** Social media has a role to play, but given the demographic of the vulnerable customer community its scope is limited; leaflets distributed within communities and especially to appropriate locations such as GP's surgeries were felt to be an especially effective way of reaching many individuals in the most vulnerable situations.
 - **Address the impacts of emotional vulnerability,** particularly in the way vulnerable customers are notified ahead of any WWU work. To do this information about communication preferences and considerations needs to be collected and recorded for each PSR member.
 - Whilst accepting that a broad profile of customers can be categorised as a priority, **consider developing a hierarchy of priority within the overall vulnerable customer category.** Living alone is a key risk factor, especially when coupled with chronic illness, disability or old age.
 - The need to prioritise will become increasingly urgent given the ageing UK demographic and additional vulnerabilities this brings: **a point will be reached at which the proportion of 'priority customers' is such that they no longer represent a minority.** The need to develop a more sensitive means of evaluating and recording relative vulnerability is therefore clear.

Introduction

- Mindset Research was appointed to undertake a programme of direct consultation with WWU customers. The research consultation comprised four main strands:

- 100 telephone with customers across Wales and South West England;
- An online survey of Care & Repair Caseworkers (31 of whom responded);
- Three focus groups with customers (in Bristol, Taunton and Swansea);
- 20 face-to-face, in-depth interviews with customers who were recruited to represent a broad range of potential vulnerabilities.



- Research strands 1 and 2 can be considered to be *quantitative* in nature (i.e. combining structured survey tools with sample sizes sufficient to support some quantification of responses). Research strands 3 and 4 can be considered to be *qualitative* in nature (i.e. relying on relatively small samples, but employing in-depth interview techniques).
- The focus of the depth interviews conducted with 'vulnerable customers' was on how WWU can enhance and develop the provision it already has in place to support those in vulnerable situations. Similarly, the online survey completed by a sample of Care & Repair Caseworkers provided this audience with a forum for sharing their views and experiences in relation to the vulnerable clients with whom they work.

- The focus of the other two strands (customer telephone survey and focus groups) was broader, encompassing opinions on issues such as WWU's priorities, sustainability, customer service and communication. However, feedback on supporting priority customers was also collected in these interviews and discussion sessions.
- This report primarily draws on the feedback obtained from the 20 depth interviews with individuals in potentially vulnerable situations. However, key findings from the other research strands have also been referenced as appropriate.

Supporting those in vulnerable situations: The context

- Key headlines from the quantitative research elements, alongside selected published statistics, are helpful in setting the overall context in which opinions on supporting those in vulnerable situations were shared...

From the telephone survey:

- Almost 9 in 10 customers have no view about whether WWU shows care and consideration to those in vulnerable situations (because their engagement with or awareness of WWU is limited).
- The 40-minute response time to emergencies: most (54%) over 75s think this is too slow.

From the Care & Repair Caseworker survey:

- 39% of Caseworkers believe all or a significant numbers of their clients limit heating because of cost.
- 58% believe their clients would have significant problems within an hour, 72% within 3 hours (in the event of an emergency).
- ...only 19% believed that MOST could prepare adequately.

In the UK today...

There are over 11 million people with a limiting long-term illness, impairment or disability (17% of the population)

19% of individuals in families with at least one disabled member live in relative income poverty

In England 11% of households are estimated to be in fuel poverty. In Wales the equivalent figure is 23%

16% of adults of working age and 45% of adults over state pension age are disabled

18% of the UK population are aged over 65

Rates of fuel poverty are higher in rural areas than urban

Sources: www.gov.uk/government/publications/disability-facts-and-figures; Overview of UK population July 2017, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity; Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Annual Fuel Poverty Statistics Report 2018; Welsh Government Fuel Poverty Updated 3rd April 2018

- The following six mini case-studies, selected to be broadly reflective of the 20 interviews we conducted, provide an overview of the types of vulnerabilities encountered and the impacts that WWU needs to consider...

Darren



"...very anxious...can have episodes of confusion and fear...leads to a mistrust of people and things that break routine. Dealing with the unknown is the worry, and being stigmatised for not really being ill at face value..."

Background:

- Medical discharge from Navy a year ago
- No longer able to work
- Young family (4 children under 12)
- Partner full-time Carer
- Suffers from PTSD
- Fuel poor (claiming benefits)



Vulnerabilities:

- Main impacts of PTSD – anxiety; episodes of confusion; mistrust of people and things that represent a break from routine; panic attacks; conspiracy theories
- Perception that PTSD is a hidden disability – fear of judgement / stigmatisation; not being recognised as disabled



Key impacts:

- Fearful of anything that disrupts routine
- Forgetful due to medication
- Unable to manage day-to-day household tasks
- Isolated – prefers not to engage with outside world
- Difficulties dealing with paperwork / paying bills
- Loud noises / disturbance unsettling



Required support measures:

- Strong preference for indirect communications i.e. hard copy letter / email communications or via carer
- Give as much advance warning as possible
- Limit face-to-face or phone communications to absolute minimum
- Recognition that PTSD is a hidden disability, but care must be taken not to stigmatise
- Reduce any noise pollution to a minimum – give as much detail and advance warning as possible to reduce associated anxiety

Diane



"...would need an alternative but concerned about the cost of running alternatives ..."

Background:

- Registered disabled
- Grandson is her full-time carer
- Fuel poor (claiming benefits)



Vulnerabilities:

- Chronic pain: back, ankles, knees
- COPD; high blood pressure; heart problems (may require stents, pacemaker)



Key impacts:

- Psychologically up and down
- Forgetful
- Unable to manage day-to-day household tasks
- Difficulties dealing with paperwork / paying bills
- Unable to access gas meter (in a cupboard) – reliant on carer to do this if required
- Difficulties coping with disruptions in routine



Required support measures:

- Communications need to be direct with her grandson (carer)
- Would require alternative heating and cooking facilities in the event of a disruption
- Concern electric fan option too expensive as an alternative due to electricity costs
- Hard copy communications preferable – can be pinned to fridge to improve recall

George



"...I struggle to pay the bills, but try hard to economise...lack of hot water would be particularly challenging..."

Background:

- Single parent
- Stay-at-home mother
- ...with young children
- Lives in social housing
- Has local wider-family support
- Fuel poor (claiming benefits)



Vulnerabilities:

- Young children at home, but does not classify herself as vulnerable – does not perceive herself as a priority case
- Fuel poverty
- Debt



Key impacts:

- Disruption in heating, cooking difficult to manage
- In event of disruption would seek to stay with family members as would be difficult to manage at home with young children in these circumstances
- Unexpected costs / large bills difficult to manage / cause anxiety



Required support measures:

- Lack of heating and hot water problematic with young children – alternative provision would need to be established quickly
- Phone communication preferable – immediate. Does not look at emails. Letter too slow.
- Advanced warnings of disruption critical so alternative provision can be made / arranged

Sonia



"...having a stroke causes communication difficulty...I need people to be patient and understand..."

Background:

- Registered disabled
- Had a stroke 18 years ago
- Husband is her full-time Carer – rarely left alone



Vulnerabilities:

- Physical disabilities resulting from stroke
- Leg weakness – uses crutches at home and wheelchair outside the house
- Arm weakness
- Tunnel vision
- Communication difficulties
- Additional health issues: emphysema; heart condition
- Psychologically reliant on full-time Carer



Key impacts:

- Anxiety if left alone
- Would panic if unannounced caller at the door
- Communication difficulties
- Heating critical to health – would be unable to stay in house without adequate heating
- In event of planned disruption would seek to stay with family members



Required support measures:

- Strong preference for indirect communications i.e. hard copy letter / email communications or via carer
- Give as much advance warning as possible
- Limit face-to-face or phone communications to absolute minimum
- Patience and understanding required due to communication difficulties
- Advanced warnings of disruption critical so alternative provision can be made / arranged

Gill



"...I take a long time to get anywhere...I don't like people coming to the door...a phone call ahead might help..."

Background:

- Chronic illness
- Became ill 10 years ago
- Limited mobility
- Family live locally (4 children)
- Fuel poor
- Has a mobility scooter



Vulnerabilities:

- COPD
- Lung disease
- Incontinent
- Cirrhosis
- Weakness in legs
- Fuel poverty



Key impacts:

- Anxiety arising from unexpected costs / bills
- Limited mobility – difficulties getting to door / leaving house
- Requires appropriate room temperature / environment for chest health



Required support measures:

- Lack of heating and hot water problematic – alternative provision would need to be established quickly
- Give as much advance warning as possible
- Allow extra time to answer door
- A phone call ahead of face-to-face contact would be preferable

Jason



"...Gas off for a few days when they did the meter. Got us a stove but we had to take her to my sisters to get her a bath – didn't offer another alternative. Hotel not an option as can't leave the dogs..."

Background:

- Chronically ill
- Currently unable to work (previously security worker), but intends to return
- Step daughter had brain tumour
- Wife full-time Carer for daughter
- House refurbished to accommodate daughter's needs – accessed grant for work
- Have pets that can't be moved / left
- Have family and friends that can be turned to



Vulnerabilities:

- Chronic illness
- Heart disease - had heart surgery 4 years ago
- Sleep apnoea - requires oxygen during night
- Daughter had brain tumour; registered blind
- Other health issues: daughter has OCD; anxiety; anger issues



Key impacts:

- Changes to daughter's routine increase anxiety / anger levels
- Daughter requires strict routine to minimise distress – meal times; bathing etc.



Required support measures:

- Lack of heating and hot water problematic – alternative provision would need to be established quickly
- Give as much advance warning as possible
- Minimise disruption levels
- Communication by phone preferable

Vulnerability

- During the course of each depth interview, respondents were asked to consider several broad scenarios in order that the likely impacts of each could be evaluated. For example, interviewers asked respondents to think about the possible impact of their gas supply being interrupted, or roads being dug up in their neighbourhood. Interviewers were also keen to raise the potentially sensitive issue of energy affordability and how it influences the decisions and actions of those affected.
- Discussions revealed the following themes:
 - The impacts of WWU undertaking planned or emergency work that would affect respondents can be considered in terms of several categories:
 1. **Direct physical impacts** (i.e. the loss of means of heating – including hot water – and cooking).



No hot water would be a pain as I'm constantly bathing and showering the kids. If no gas, no hot water.

Gas disruption would affect me...I'm susceptible to catching colds and chest infections.

My daughter likes hot baths and is quite OCD, has poor vision and is more comfortable in a bath. Any change to her routine can upset her.

In the winter we'd need heating so couldn't cope without an alternative...in summer, we could cope.

I could cope with no gas for cooking – you could always get takeaways. Heating would be an issue.

[conditions]...make me sleepy, can't control my temperature so I sweat a lot, need to bathe daily, wash clothes and sheets frequently. How would they provide hot water?

2. **Indirect physical impacts:** This category included concerns about road and pavement access and tended to be raised most often by respondents who required regular access for themselves or their visitors. Examples of this included one respondent explaining that he requires regular dialysis and is collected by taxi every other day. Similarly, other respondents expressed concerns about whether their carers would be able to reach them, or whether they would be able to leave their house by wheelchair and negotiate WWU's roadworks and barriers.



Would have more of an impact in Winter. If I'm on my own and had to get out, I'd struggle as I use crutches in the home and a wheelchair outside. My husband is my carer but he's not always here.

...I need to get out every other day to go to the hospital – I'm picked up.

...the road in particular...if they had to close the road...very narrow, difficult to get around it if they needed to dig it up.

3. **Mental/emotional:** The extent to which respondents spoke of less tangible impacts was notable and perhaps surprising. Often respondents described genuine anxiety or emotional turmoil potentially associated with disruptions to their routines. Being without their gas supply represented a significant disruption to routine for many. For some, even receiving a notification communication could be enough to make them fearful and anxious.



I'm worried about anything that upsets my routines. I panic. I'd need an idea of what they are working on...I have a lot of conspiracy theories running round my head.

- Most agreed that the loss of a means of heating their homes is more critical than the loss of cooking facilities. Being without hot water was identified as a particular problem by a number of the sample. Included in this group were parents of babies and small children and sufferers of conditions which make regular bathing especially important.
- In general, most also agreed that disruptions in electricity supplies are more critical than the loss of their gas supply.
- The sample of customers selected for the depth interviews included some respondents who were in receipt of benefits and/or could be considered to be in fuel poverty. Some of the comments by respondents in this category related to how challenging it is for them to balance the books and energy costs represent a significant part of their weekly budget, especially in winter. Although most did not feel that they limited their heating because of affordability factors, a small number did admit that they sometimes choose to heat only one or two rooms or turn the thermostat down to a setting lower than they would ideally like. It is also worth mentioning the link between struggling to manage limited budgets and anxiety in particular, or mental health more generally.
- Although identifying a correlation between relative affluence and mental health is well beyond the scope of this study, it was clear that in our research sample, several respondents who struggled to balance their budgets were also amongst the most anxious and potentially vulnerable of those we interviewed. Furthermore, limited means was often the result of only one income coming into the household: so the vulnerabilities emerging out of limited means

were compounded by anxiety and mental health issues, which in turn were aggravated by living alone and having no-one to share the burden with.



I've had financial problems...I've also suffered from depression and anxiety.

Priorities within priorities: Identifying the most vulnerable

- The **focus groups** held with a broad range of WWU customers made observations about supporting those most in need and, in discussing this subject, they debated issues around:
 - ...who are the most vulnerable?
 - who are the most deserving of support?
 - and which groups should WWU, in their view, consider to be the priorities?
- The conclusion in most cases – and this view was shared by our sample of vulnerable customers – was that identifying ‘vulnerable customers’ is insufficiently precise. In their view, it is necessary for WWU to **‘prioritise within the priority group’**. The consensus formed in the focus group was that the ‘top priority’ category included the elderly and disabled but especially individuals in these categories who live alone.
- These thoughts (from customers who, for the most part did not belong to any of the identified vulnerable groups) were mirrored and supported to a considerable degree by the comments and circumstances of the individuals recruited for our interviews with vulnerable customers.
- Our sample spanned a wide range of needs and potential vulnerabilities, relating to age, to illness and disability, to financial hardship and to family and household circumstances. **In many cases, multiple vulnerabilities were outlined or became apparent during the course of the interview.**
- Several points need to be made about the nature and impact of vulnerability amongst this group:
 - **By no means all believed that they should be treated as a priority** by WWU and some were surprised that they met the ‘priority’ criteria and standards to which WWU adheres.



[Elderly retired widower] ...do not in any way consider myself as a vulnerable customer. Physically and mentally able...don't need any support.

I could be on the Register...I would say yes but I don't need any additional support...but I'd like to know about work that is going on as a priority.

- However, **it was also abundantly clear that most of our sample were potentially very vulnerable** in many circumstances – and this includes an interruption to their gas supply.
- **Reluctance to accept help was commonplace**, even amongst some individuals who suffered from severe illness or disability and/or were clearly potentially vulnerable.

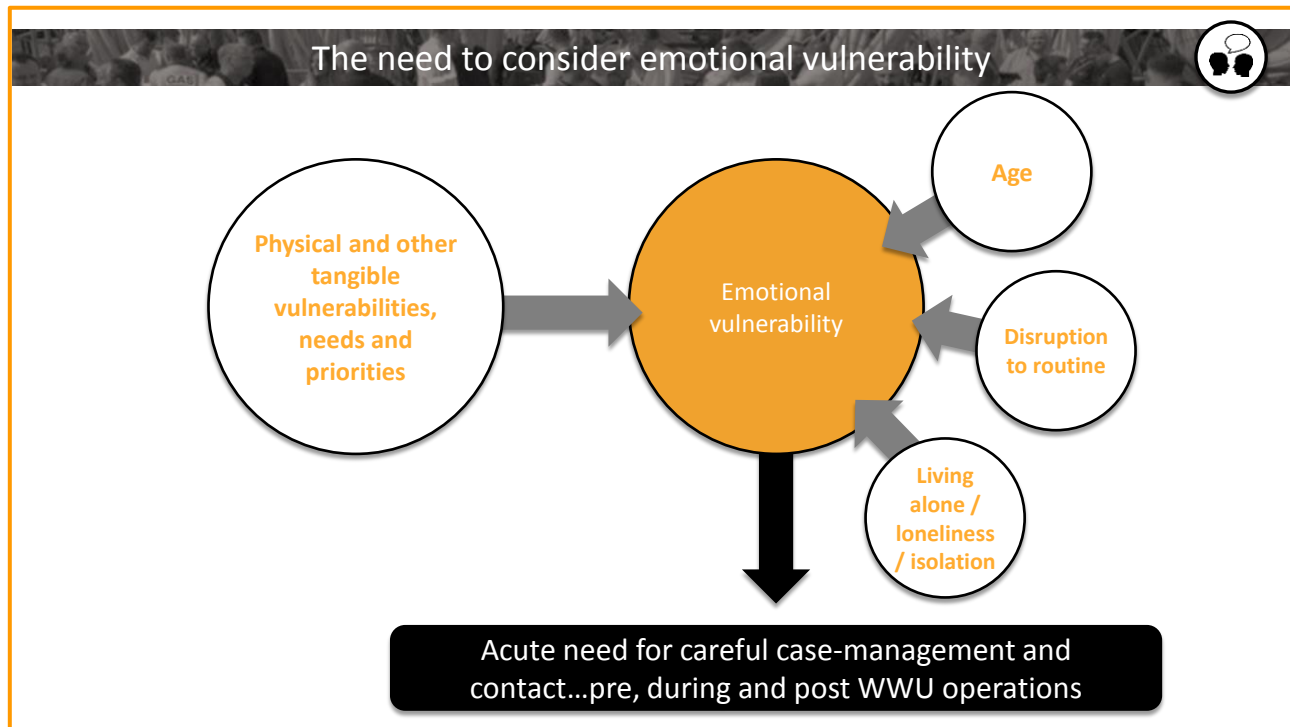


Sounds good but I don't like taking stuff...I like to think I can support myself.

- **Living alone can leave people especially vulnerable**, depending on their circumstances and/or access to local support networks (e.g. neighbours, family and friends)
- Indeed, the extent to which individuals are or at least feel vulnerable is largely dependent on **whether they have family living in close proximity to them**. For example, when considering the impact of WWU interruptions, many of the vulnerable customers we interviewed indicated that, in these circumstances they would temporarily move in with their relatives.
- **Customers with ‘hidden’ disabilities feel particularly vulnerable** since as well as dealing with sometimes complex conditions, they also suffer from a sense that their disability is not widely recognised or understood.
- **The qualification criterion of having children aged under five was often met with surprise** – even by those who had young children of their own. The general thinking was that, in itself, having young children should not perhaps be considered enough to qualify as a priority customer – but a special case should be made for single-parent households, especially if very young children are present. We interviewed several individuals who fell into this category and it was apparent that they were vulnerable because of the challenges of looking after young children in the event of a gas interruption but also because their financial means were limited.
- **Vulnerability changes over time and includes both long-term, gradual shifts as well as short-term, ad hoc situational vulnerability**. For example, several members of our sample were recruited on the basis of being pensioners and, whilst some did not see themselves as vulnerable or as priority customers currently, they explained that this may well change as they get older: they might have to deal with more physical limitations, or perhaps with memory loss or dementia. On the other hand, some vulnerability can be very short-term (e.g. grand-parents looking after their young grand-children for the weekend).
- In relation to interruptions to the gas supply, the consequences and **impacts tend to be influenced by time of year**. In particular, an interruption to supplies is potentially much more problematic during the winter than at other times of the year. This was something that many respondents commented on.
- The issue of vulnerability was discussed at length with our sample of vulnerable customers. They often questioned the meaning of terms such as ‘vulnerability’ or ‘priority customers’ and at the heart of these discussions was the observation that **some individuals are generally and perpetually vulnerable whilst others might only become vulnerable in the event of, for example, WWU undertaking planned work or needing to interrupt supplies in an emergency situation**. Respondents sometimes asked questions about how far WWU wishes to go in addressing vulnerability: is it just concerned with supporting those most in need when supplies are interrupted...or does it have a deeper interest in looking out for and in some way helping to support those individuals in society who are physically, emotionally or financially vulnerable?

- Particularly if the latter is true, our sample of vulnerable customers agreed that the most vulnerable (i.e. those in greatest need of ongoing support) are often those who are struggling on limited means AND struggle to deal with the 'everyday' challenges of managing their affairs that most people easily cope with and take for granted:

Considering emotional vulnerability



- Respondents were recruited for the depth interviews on the basis of fulfilling one or more of the following criteria (in turn, based on Ofgem's guidance on priority customers):
 - Registered disabled
 - Suffer from chronic illness
 - Pensioner
 - In receipt of state benefits / fuel poor
 - Single parent / children under 5
- **However, across many interviews – perhaps most – it was clear that the extent of vulnerabilities potentially impacting on an individual extend far beyond the tangible and recorded 'conditions' or situations used to define the nature of vulnerability for the purposes of recruiting a research sample.** In particular, in many instances it was apparent that anxiety – resulting largely from the circumstances determined by vulnerability – needs to be considered as a major factor in evaluating the level and nature of support required when, for example WWU needs to undertake planned or emergency work affecting gas supplies.



Anxiety provoked by people I don't know...strangers and my frame of mind at the time...I suffer from depression too. Can they try their best to always contact ahead of any visit? – by phone. As much warning as possible. ID badges, large enough to read.

Grey line between disabled and hidden disability –which I feel PTSD is - not sure if this counts as registered disabled. Main impact is I'm very anxious and can have episodes of confusion and fear leading to a mistrust of people and things that break from my routine. Dealing with the unknown is the big fear...prefer not to engage with people or tasks...fearful of anything that disrupts routine so I'd react poorly to workmen or strangers knocking on doors. I'd prefer warning by letter and dealing indirectly by email, internet...

I panic if people call at the door when I'm on my own.

- In particular, anxiety – and in some cases, wider mental health issues, including depression – should, in our sample's view be considered by WWU in offering support and in identifying those in greatest need of support. There are a number of key aspects to anxiety, how it impacts on individuals and what it means in terms of the level and type of additional support that WWU might need to consider...
- Those who suffer from anxiety explained to us that this condition can be crippling, especially if they are dealing with it on their own. It causes them to worry – panic even – about apparently mundane and minor disruptions to their routine. Fear of the unknown is a powerful trigger, causing many sufferers of anxiety to do everything possible to avoid change or disruption, especially if this is sudden or unexpected. **In the context of WWU and the way it is likely to engage with individuals and communities when undertaking work, supporting those suffering from anxiety means it needs to think very carefully about communication ahead of, during and after emergency or planned mains replacement work.**
- Some mental illness sufferers need to be told details – far beyond what might be 'necessary' or expected.
- Many of the most vulnerable individuals are also the most private and potentially invisible customers, especially where vulnerability is compounded by mental health issues and/or anxiety. Sufferers explained to us that they find it difficult to open up to anyone they do not know or trust – and this of course includes organisations such as WWU. They are nervous of making contact and tend not to be proactive. The challenge facing WWU is how therefore can these individuals be identified and supported when they are reluctant to put themselves forward as being in need of help?

- The solution needs to draw upon:
 - **Working with local communities** to encourage the sharing of information about who might be vulnerable – and putting in place mechanisms to make this manageable.
 - **Continuing with the approach of training ‘on the ground’ staff** to be vigilant and alert to the signs of vulnerability.
 - **Partnership working** – including organisations that are already working with and trusted by these vulnerable people.
- The concept of WWU working in partnership with other organisations prompted much comment:
 - Respondents – both in the vulnerable customer sample and those who participated in the focus groups – were consistent in their view that WWU must continue to develop strong links with its partners.
 - This applies in particular to looking out for the most vulnerable.
 - The net must be thrown as wide as possible to ensure that WWU engages with a range of organisations who might already have some contact with individuals in vulnerable situations. This is especially important in relation to vulnerability arising from, or influenced by mental health issues. Sufferers often admitted that they struggle to trust ‘new’ people and organisations and, because of this, if WWU is to engage with them (or even identify them initially), it is essential that they work in partnership with agencies with which vulnerable customers are familiar and which they trust.
 - Although much discussion took place about how far WWU should get involved in referrals (e.g. in relation to income, debt or health concerns), the majority view was that they should...
 - A small number of respondents in the vulnerable customer sample expressed some reservations about how far WWU should ‘intrude’ – largely based on pride and a perceived stigma attached to ‘being in need’ or asking for help.

Living alone

- Living alone is self-evidently a vulnerability in itself and is especially significant for the 'older elderly'. This was identified by the customer focus groups – which suggested that this group should be treated as perhaps the highest priority...
- ...and many of the vulnerable customers we interviewed in-depth were in this situation and spoke at length about the vulnerability of living alone. As well as the practical problems and challenges of living alone, isolation and loneliness can easily contribute to higher levels of worry and anxiety.
- Living alone has both practical and emotional impacts:
 - There is the obvious vulnerability of not having someone on hand to spot issues, problems and dangers.
 - Old age is often coupled with illness and disability so any change to routine is potentially problematic. Having to face this alone, without someone to share the burden and make practical arrangements, makes the situation challenging for many.
 - Not being able to share and discuss often leads to increased anxiety...
 - **...to the point that anxiety about potential disruption to routines can become more of an issue than any 'tangible' vulnerabilities that might be more visible or which, in the case of PSR members, are formally listed.**

The Priority Services Register

- The PSR was discussed at length in the depth interviews with vulnerable customers, but also in the three focus groups (held with a broad cross-section of WWU customers). Across both audiences – vulnerable customers and focus group attendees – respondents asked many questions about how WWU identifies those most in need, which led subsequently to much discussion about Priority Services Registers, how they are compiled and how people get to know about them.
- Most of our vulnerable customer sample were, to the best of their knowledge NOT on WWU’s Priority Services Register. Very few in fact had even heard of the Priority Services Register: based on our sample of 20 vulnerable customers...
 - One in four had heard of the Priority Services Register.
 - One in five believed they were on a register (but this tended to be based on their relationship with their gas or energy supplier – leading also to questions and assumptions about whether registers are shared by suppliers, utilities and networks).



Definitely this would benefit us...didn't know anything like this was out there.

Would social services not pick up the ones that need help. Do they not refer them [to the PSR] and WWU?

Could I be on the Register?

They should write to pensioners to raise the profile and explain what they do and how they can help. A fridge magnet would be good so that if a letter isn't relevant at the time, you can at least keep the number somewhere.

Sounds really good...being told about any work ahead of time...reassuring that you'll be informed.

I'm surprised Swalec haven't passed on the information.

Half the time you aren't told about these disruptions so good to be told upfront rather than struggling to find out yourself.

- Interest in the concept of a Priority Services Register was clear, both across the vulnerable customer depth interviews and the WWU customer focus groups. Both research strands delivered generally strong and consistent views, which included:

- There is, in customers' opinions, a clear and urgent need for the PSR to be better promoted.



They should promote it via social media...I'm on a lot of Facebook groups for Fibromyalgia as well as local [Plymouth] groups and pages where tips and advice is shared.

- Generally the public (as represented by our research samples) expects that utilities, suppliers and other agencies will share information about those in vulnerable situations to produce one comprehensive, cohesive register.
- Customers should have to sign-up – or be signed up – only once...and from that point on, WWU, other utilities and suppliers should identify PSR members and prioritise them appropriately.
- Despite some awareness of data protection in general and GDPR in particular, respondents are of the view that the risks of being vulnerable far outweigh data sharing regulations: common-sense must prevail and that means moving the onus away from the individual, towards the organisations with which they come into contact.
- In the focus groups and to a more limited degree, the depth interviews, there was some discussion and concern that a proportion of those attracted to the Register will be 'less deserving'. Respondents were keen that steps are taken to ensure that the PSR is reserved for those genuinely in need.
- **Most of the individuals who formed the research sample for the vulnerable customer depth interviews were neither on the Register (to the best of their knowledge), nor did they know of its existence.** They were generally keen to know more and possibly sign-up, both for the tangible benefits and support measures (which were listed for them in the interviews) but, of equal importance, for the comfort of knowing that they will be the first to be notified in the event of emergency or planned gas work that might disrupt their supply.
- **Consequently, respondents felt that the immediate focus should be on raising the profile of the register and simplifying the sign-up process and ongoing membership.** In particular, respondents put forward the following considerations and suggestions:
 - There are many ways to promote the PSR. Suggestions included:
 - Leaflets and flyers distributed door-to-door, ideally incorporating an easy-to-complete tear-off and return form.
 - Distribution of promotional leaflets in the places that vulnerable people tend to visit (e.g. GP's waiting rooms; community centres; libraries etc.).
 - Targeted use of social media, encouraging users to share with others they know to belong to vulnerable groups.

- Fridge magnets (which seem to be an extremely popular way that the individuals in our sample retain information and contact numbers for organisations and agencies that they might need to rely upon).
- Information about the PSR on the side of WWU vans (since, they reasoned, vans tend to be the highest profile carrier of the WWU brand).



I think they should send out leaflets with a form or something like that. If you're in these categories, you can send it back to them. I'm not online so it would have to be post.

- The application and registration process needs to be as simple as possible and should ideally utilise a variety of channels, appropriate for a range of circumstances and preferences. Some of the most vulnerable explained that they can find apparently simple tasks such as signing-up to a scheme challenging.
- Membership should be automatically rolled over from year to year – but details might need to be updated since contact information, as well as vulnerabilities might change.
- **Given the range of preferences for contact methods, notification periods (etc.), the application process perhaps needs to include simple questions to establish preferred contact method, level of detail required, notification period, any other considerations etc.**

Notification and communication

- **A key finding of the depth interviews with vulnerable customers is that the communication process ahead of, or at the point of planned or emergency work is as important for WWU to get right as the more tangible support measures it has in place for priority customers.**
- It is also true that communication preferences are very individual. Ideally, WWU should establish and record how each vulnerable customer can be most effectively and appropriately communicated with and choose from a 'toolkit' of communication channels and approaches, based on the priority customer in question. It is of course appreciated that tailoring communications to this degree might not be feasible but, at the very least, WWU needs to consider some of the key thoughts and observations of our sample of vulnerable customers. These include:
 - 'Required' notification periods vary from person to person.
 - Similarly, preferred communication methods vary.
 - **Most vulnerable customers are less sensitive to the approach taken, but some – including those who have acute anxiety issues – are extremely sensitive to the way in which communications are organised. Consequently, the ideal scenario would be that information impacting the selection of communication approach should be collected at sign-up (to the PSR) and held on file.**
 - Letters, signs and notices displayed in the locality, email, text, telephone and door-to-door communications all potentially have a role to play. Some respondents suggested that the approach taken by other 'rapid response' organisations could help WWU develop its communications repertoire.



...more acceptable if I can plan things...would want more notice...at least a day or two as I need to get my mind around someone coming to the door. I'd prefer letters up front...would not like strangers calling if my partner's not here...possibly a phone call to follow up on a letter and then warning so I can prepare if someone is coming to the door.

...prefer to be informed about disruptions by letter...having a letter, can pin it up so I don't forget or get confused.

I compare it to the Green Flag app...it provides updates of where engineers are...

WWU Support measures, current and future

- Most respondents did not know the support measures WWU has in place for those in vulnerable situations (both in relation to PSR requirements and 'over and above' WWU initiatives). Indeed, few respondents were even aware that any additional support was available for priority customers in the event that WWU needs to undertake planned or emergency work. A small minority mentioned measures such as the provision of alternative heating equipment and in one or two instances, respondents believed that they had benefitted from these in the past.
- Time was taken, during the vulnerable customer depth interviews and the customer focus groups to outline the measures currently in place:

The benefits of being registered on the Priority Service Register...people on the register...

- Will be offered alternative cooking and heating facilities if their gas supply is interrupted
- Could have their gas meter moved for free if they are unable to access it
- Can choose a password to make sure they know our engineers are genuine
- Can ask their suppliers to send their bill to a trusted friend or family member
- Will benefit from our 'Knock and Wait' service

Other WWU support measures...

- Locking Cooker Valve
- Hardship Fund
- Free of charge alterations
- Service to educate about the dangers of Carbon Monoxide and provision of CO alarms
- Alternative cooking and heating facilities (e.g. hotplates and fan heaters; microwaves; oil-filled radiators; keep warm packs)
- Warm Home Assistance Scheme

- Once informed about these support measures, almost all were surprised and cheered by the extent of the measures...but this often led to questions about why they hadn't been informed.

- Alternative heating facilities were believed to be relevant and vital by almost all and all measures and initiatives resonated with some members of our sample:

Locking Cooker Valve:

- Considered by almost all to be a great idea and amongst the customers we interviewed, we found examples of people who felt this measure might be appropriate for them.



This is a good idea...the medication I'm on makes me forgetful...do sometimes leave the cooker on, when feeding kids. Dangerous part of daily life and interested in this.

I have left cooker on or put food in and forgotten to turn oven on...if my grandson wasn't here I'd need it.

Hardship Fund:

- Not required by most of our respondents but its presence is reassuring and reflects well on WWU. The nature of some respondents' vulnerability would however mean that significant disruption to their familiar routine – such as spending time away from home – would be very difficult to contemplate.



Not heard of this. Reminds me of the insurance advert on TV...flooding...and being put up in a hotel. Good idea.

If for some reason couldn't stay with family I'd like to have this as a back-up.

Good to be offered to other people, single parents, elderly...but risk that people may be playing the system, so need to check people carefully to see what they spend their money on.

Could be useful as I do struggle with bills. Also depends how long the gas is off...but I have family locally that I could go and stay with.

Good. Is that plumbing and gas work? Any work? Being on disability you don't get much income. Have no one else at home so no other income from anywhere else. Hotel good idea but problem is I suffer with anxiety and sometimes I can't even go into shops....but still a very good idea.

Don't like idea of hotel...would find it stressful...would be more comfortable staying at home. I'd worry about leaving property empty as well.

Free of charge alterations:

- Similarly, not needed by most of the sample but a sensible and welcome measure nonetheless.



Good idea...if I needed to have it moved, I'd struggle to find the extra money.

Good for people like me with wheelchairs...I couldn't access the meter as it's in a cupboard in kitchen...If I was on my own this would be needed.

Service to educate about the dangers of Carbon Monoxide and provision of CO alarms:

- Levels of awareness of CO and its dangers were generally encouraging, both across the depth interviews and customer focus groups. Some expected this to be the responsibility of gas suppliers. However, WWU's involvement in this issue is welcomed and we found examples of individuals who currently felt vulnerable to the dangers of CO and wondered if WWU supplies free alarms to its most vulnerable customers.



Brilliant if we can get one [CO alarm]. We only have one at moment. Had a friend die from CO poisoning at 15...gas fire not switched off, went to sleep and never woke up. Our boiler is ancient – post war, but really old. Gets maintained every year but I don't trust it and have asked for a new one.

Have bought these...one for motorhome too. Think it's brilliant but would have thought this was the responsibility of the gas supplier already?

Bought one on advice of my son...wouldn't have thought about it without him mentioning it. Good that they get involved in this.

Alternative cooking and heating facilities (e.g. hotplates and fan heaters; microwaves; oil-filled radiators; keep warm packs):

- As already mentioned, the impact of losing heating is generally considered to be greater than that of being without cooking temporarily. Hot water is considered critical by some.
- A significant number of our sample suffered from multiple conditions, some of which makes them especially vulnerable to the cold. Therefore, in winter in particular, the loss of heating is potentially very concerning to them.

- Another observation, common to several respondents from the vulnerable customer sample was that they themselves – or other vulnerable people they knew of – might be reluctant to make use of alternative electric heating facilities because of concern about how much it would cost them to run. Many respondents explained that they operate on tight budgets and, because they are familiar with their central heating, they know almost exactly how much they are paying. Introducing new, unfamiliar equipment into the equation would make some potential recipients worried, even anxious.



Warm packs good for elderly customers – very comprehensive list of things they're offering.

Didn't know it existed. No alternative to gas central heating so heaters would probably be of more interest.

Heating alternatives are particularly important due to the cold and risk of chest infections.

Have had this [cooking facilities]...worked well...they were brilliant, got it straight away.

Warm Home Assistance Scheme:

- There was clear evidence of interest in this scheme amongst our sample of vulnerable customers. Some commented on the requirement for customers to be proactive in applying – and, in some cases respondents were worried that the most vulnerable are the least able or likely to apply. There were also some comments about the potential for the scheme to be abused.



Needs to be linked to the benefits system. Similar to TV licence...free for over 70's but they don't contact you, you have to ask for it.

Think this is wrong. Why should other people pay to fund other people? If they can afford cigarettes and alcohol they can afford the basics like gas and electric. Better to be done via the benefits system so that it is an all-round payment system. If utility bill is paid for them then they have to repay via benefits system.

Boiler is responsibility of the Council so not relevant to me...but a good idea for private rented properties.



- **Although the support measures WWU has in place were considered to be excellent (albeit unknown by most), there was a very clear sense that as important as the tangible provisions is a need for a systematic means of communicating and managing vulnerability (and frequently anxiety) ahead of, during and after any work that WWU undertakes that has an impact on them.**
- Respondents recognised that there are no easy answers here and the nature of vulnerability tends to be unique to the individual. However, there is agreement amongst respondents that vulnerability needs to be identified at an early stage and, wherever possible, the anxieties and concerns that any disruption might cause are recognised and carefully managed from the outset.
- In practice, this would mean keeping vulnerable customers very well-informed in the lead-up to planned work and, in the case of emergency repairs, making every effort to identify the most vulnerable at the earliest stage, ensuring that a dialogue is initiated and continued (ideally on terms with which the customer in question is most comfortable). For some, this might mean face-to-face but for others this would be too daunting and email or text communication would be more appropriate. Clearly, key to achieving this is; (a) promoting the availability of support for vulnerable customers and identifying the priorities and; (b) collecting information about the nature of customers' vulnerability and any relevant communication preferences and considerations.