

**Workshop on the needs of vulnerable consumers during smart
metering rollout**

20th January 2011

N.B. Content does not represent a preferred option or view by Ofgem/DECC.

For this workshop, attendees were asked to consider the following questions:

- **What particular needs might different groups of vulnerable consumers have during the rollout of smart metering?**
- **How might the specific needs of different groups of vulnerable consumers be addressed?**

The discussion focused on the needs of vulnerable consumers during the rollout of smart meters. A number of other issues of relevance for vulnerable consumers were out of scope for the purposes of this workshop. This included remote disconnection and remote switching to prepayment mode, as well as sales and marketing at the point of installation. The smart metering programme has held separate workshops on these issues. Further information on these workshops can be found on the Ofgem website [here](#).

Segmentation of vulnerable consumers

The workshop considered the different groups of vulnerable consumers that might require special consideration or assistance during the rollout of smart meters. However, within any grouping attendees felt that there would be some consumers who would not require any additional assistance. Furthermore, some individuals might only be considered vulnerable for a short period.

Attendees identified sick and disabled consumers as one group who might require additional help during rollout. The need for specific support might arise from difficulties with for example, sight, hearing and mobility. There were also concerns around the loss of energy supply during the visit as this might affect medical equipment such as dialysis machines. Attendees also suggested that sick and disabled consumers might require additional security measures such as passwords, or the presence of a carer or other third party during the visit.

Attendees felt that elderly consumers might face some of the same difficulties as those who were sick and disabled. Of particular concern were security and misselling at the point of installation, as some elderly people are likely to be more trusting than other consumers are. Attendees also felt elderly consumers might be anxious about the costs of smart meters or the temporary loss of supply. Finally, it was suggested that some members of this group might find it more difficult to adjust to new technology, and as such there would be a greater need for follow-up advice and support.

Other groups who attendees considered might need particular support included those with poor language/literacy skills, or with learning difficulties. It was felt that these consumers might have difficulty engaging with marketing materials and the information available from smart meters. Attendees were also concerned that low-income consumers and the fuel poor may be reluctant to engage with suppliers, for instance where these consumers might be in debt.

Identification of vulnerable consumers

Attendees felt that the rollout of smart metering presents an opportunity to improve identification of vulnerable consumers.

The Priority Services Register (PSR) was suggested as one potential mechanism for identifying those consumers who might need additional help. However, attendees felt that the PSR would not capture all consumers in need of support during rollout. Some attendees felt that suppliers could also identify vulnerable consumers through a 'pre-appointment survey' and at point of installation.

Attendees discussed the data sharing model that was used for Digital UK, although it was pointed out that special legislation was necessary to facilitate this due to data protection laws. At a local level, it was felt that local authorities might be able to help identify vulnerable consumers. Local organisations, such as doctors and housing associations might also be able to refer consumers to additional help provided during the rollout.

Finally, self-referral was considered an important element of any identification process. In particular, attendees felt that this would be important for consumers who are temporarily vulnerable, as these will be difficult to identify through existing lists. It was also noted that many consumers who may benefit from special assistance might be reluctant to be identified as vulnerable.

Opportunities provided by the visit

Attendees discussed the range of opportunities presented by the smart meter installation visit that might benefit vulnerable consumers in particular.

It was suggested that the visit could be used to update the PSR. There was also support for using the visit to deliver existing schemes more effectively. Schemes such as the Community Energy Saving Programme (CESP) and Warm Front already target some groups of vulnerable consumers and it was felt that coordination between these schemes and smart metering could increase their efficiency of delivery.

A number of attendees felt that the visit would be an opportunity to inform vulnerable consumers of wider benefits available to them, such as welfare benefits, or other schemes which might afford them help or savings.

Attendees also suggested that the installation visit might present an opportunity to promote engagement with the energy market more broadly. For example, it was felt that vulnerable consumers could benefit from information on how to reduce energy costs, eg through switching.

Addressing the needs of vulnerable consumers

There was agreement among attendees that the rollout should be designed in such a way that all consumers can access the benefits of smart metering and that vulnerable consumers are not left until last. It was felt that good quality, inclusive and mainstream communications would be a cost

effective way of achieving these objectives while minimising the need to provide special assistance for particular vulnerable groups.

In discussing how the needs of vulnerable consumers could be addressed, attendees felt it helpful to consider the different stages of the consumer experience of smart metering, ie pre-installation, installation and post installation.

Prior to the installation visit, attendees suggested that the identification of vulnerable consumers should be a priority activity. Attendees also stressed the importance of providing clear information, for example generic marketing, in advance of the meter being installed. This information should aim to raise awareness and understanding of smart metering and explain what to expect during the visit itself. One attendee suggested that mainstream channels of communication, such as local press and radio, can be the most effective means of reaching vulnerable consumers. This approach might also avoid the stigma that some vulnerable consumers could feel at being singled out for additional help. Attendees felt that there may be some consumers who do need additional or specialised information, for example in different formats or languages. On this point, it was noted that some suppliers already provide some tailored materials.

Security was perceived to be an important issue. It was suggested that information should be provided in advance on the uniforms and passes carried by installers. Attendees also felt that additional measures should be offered to vulnerable consumers. Finally, attendees highlighted the importance of appropriate staff training. This would include training for installers as well as call centre staff. On this point, some suppliers highlighted that some staff already undergo specialist training for dealing with vulnerable consumers.

During the installation visit, the importance of simple and inclusive information provision was again emphasised strongly by attendees. It was also suggested that some consumers would benefit from a third party accompanying them during the visit, such as a carer, relative or social worker. This would require communication between suppliers and local organisations, such as charities. Attendees also felt that there would be particular requirements unique to some vulnerable consumers around meter location, and the need for meters to be placed in an accessible place for prepayment. Finally, one attendee asked that suppliers provide free additional energy efficiency measures to vulnerable groups during the visit. On this point, it was noted that Southern Water has contracted Groundwork to provide efficiency advice to the most vulnerable consumers during the rollout of water meters to help them reduce their bills.

After the installation visit, attendees felt that a follow-up check would be particularly important for vulnerable groups. Some attendees suggested that this could take the form of a follow-up visit or call, which might include the offer of personalised energy efficiency advice. Attendees stressed the importance of there being a clear contact point for the resolution of any issues and/or a free helpline. Some attendees felt that there should be a central helpline for all consumers, while others thought that a customer should contact their supplier directly in the first instance. Some attendees were in favour of the help scheme model set up by Digital UK.

For the long term, attendees raised the possibility of more dedicated feedback and tips. In addition, a need was identified for the reinforcement of information and advice. It was also considered

important to learn from experience during the early stages of rollout to help improve any support provided to vulnerable consumers.

Roles of different parties

Attendees felt that government should play an important role in endorsing the programme, such that consumers have a clear understanding of the reasons for the rollout. Similarly, attendees felt that government should act to reassure consumers about concerns they might have. Most attendees felt that a central body would be necessary to support coordination between the different parties that could help in delivery of the programme, namely suppliers, local authorities and third parties, such as charities. This central body might also facilitate consistency of messaging.

Some attendees suggested suppliers should have primary responsibility for identifying vulnerable consumers. Suppliers were also felt to be an important source of information and advice, before, during and after the visit.

Local authorities and other third parties, such as charities or landlords, were felt to be well placed to communicate messages to vulnerable consumers. These groups were also seen to have a potential role in supporting vulnerable consumers during or after the visit, as well as being able to refer consumers to other sources of support. It was noted however that any involvement from local or third sector bodies was likely to require resources and support. The media were also identified as having a role as influencers, and being a good vehicle for publicity, for instance around any helpline telephone number.

Next steps

- This workshop is the final workshop on smart meter rollout issues during this current phase.
- Further work will be undertaken by the programme in subsequent phases on the measures necessary to protect and promote the interests of vulnerable consumers.