



## **Vulnerable Consumers and the Priority Services Register**

**A report prepared for Ofgem by BritainThinks**

June 2013

## Table of contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>1. Introduction</b>   | P4  |
| <b>2. Executive Summary</b>                                    | P5  |
| 2.1 The customer-company relationship                          |     |
| 2.2 Awareness and views of PSR services                        |     |
| 2.3 The nature of vulnerability                                |     |
| 2.4 Eligibility criteria                                       |     |
| 2.5 Usefulness of PSR services                                 |     |
| 2.6 Communications and branding                                |     |
| <b>3. Methodology</b>  | P7  |
| 3.1 All participants   |     |
| 3.2 PSR customers & eligible customers                         |     |
| 3.3 PSR customers only   |     |
| 3.4 Eligible customers only                                    |     |
| 3.5 Non-eligible customers                                     |     |
| <b>4. Context of the Energy Market</b>                         | P9  |
| 4.1 Customers' views towards energy companies in general       |     |
| 4.2 Drivers of negativity                                      |     |
| 4.3 The nature of the customer-energy company relationship     |     |
| <b>5. The Nature of Vulnerability</b>                          | P12 |
| 5.1 The complexity of need                                     |     |
| 5.2 Signposts to vulnerability                                 |     |
| 5.3 Customers' own understanding of vulnerability              |     |
| <b>6. Awareness, Expectations &amp; Experiences of the PSR</b> | p16 |
| 6.1 Awareness of the PSR                                       |     |
| 6.2 Expectations of the PSR                                    |     |
| 6.3 Experiences of the PSR                                     |     |
| <b>7. PSR Eligibility &amp; Customers' Views</b>               | P19 |
| 7.1 Appropriateness of current eligibility                     |     |
| 7.2 Additional eligibility                                     |     |
| <b>8. Suitability of PSR Services</b>                          | P21 |
| 8.1 Suitability of current services                            |     |
| 8.2 Suitability of additional services                         |     |
| 8.3 Customers' ideas for new services                          |     |
| 8.4 The roles of suppliers and distributors                    |     |
| <b>9. Prioritising Services</b>                                | P34 |
| 9.1 Difficulty of defining trade-offs                          |     |
| 9.2 Exceptions   |     |
| 9.3 Implications   |     |
| <b>10. Communications</b>                                      | P37 |
| 10.1 Low awareness and understanding                           |     |
| 10.2 Need for clearer communications                           |     |
| 10.3 Being informed of the PSR                                 |     |
| 10.4 Reactions to names  |     |
| 10.5 Transferring details and data security                    |     |
| <b>11. What Makes Vulnerable Consumers Different</b>           | P41 |
| <b>12. Key messages</b>  | P42 |

**13. Appendix 1: Recruitment specifications** p44

**14. Appendix 2: Discussion guides** p47

## 1. Introduction

In Spring 2013, Ofgem commissioned BritainThinks, an independent research agency, to conduct a series of interviews and focus groups with customers of energy companies in order to inform its proposals for the new Consumer Vulnerability Strategy - specifically to explore issues relating to the current suitability of the Priority Service Register and how it may operate in future.

All energy companies, including suppliers and distribution network companies, are obliged to keep a Priority Services Register (PSR) - a list of customers who may have additional needs in relation to energy - and to offer them a number of services aimed at helping to meet these needs.

Currently, companies have to offer to place customers that fall into the following groups onto their Priority Service Register (although individual companies may advertise it by a different name):

- Those of pensionable age.
- Those with a disability.
- Those with hearing and/or visual impairments.
- Those with long-term ill-health.

Although not a service on the Priority Services Register, companies are also obliged to offer free gas safety checks to customers who fit specific eligibility criteria:

- They own their own home.
- They receive means-tested benefits.
- They have not received a private gas safety check in the last 12 months.
- Another person or organisation is not obligated to make sure they receive a gas safety check every 12 months.
- They are either:
  - Living with a child under 5, or
  - Of pensionable age, disabled or chronically sick
    - Or living with others who are above pensionable age, disabled or chronically sick.

The aim of the research was:

- To explore vulnerable customers' needs in relation to energy.
- To explore knowledge and awareness of the Priority Services Register (and free gas safety checks).
- To assess the suitability of current and potential future PSR services (and free gas safety checks).
- To understand customers' views on current eligibility and potentially extending eligibility to certain other groups.

The research involved talking to a mixture of customers already on the Priority Services Register<sup>1</sup>, those who are eligible for PSR services but not signed up to it and those who are not currently eligible, but who could potentially benefit from the PSR's current or future services.

---

<sup>1</sup> In reality, different energy companies hold Priority Service Registers separately. However, for the sake of simplicity the PSR is referred to in the singular for the purpose of this report.

## 2. Executive Summary

### 2.1 The customer-company relationship

- The research showed that energy companies have essentially transactional relationships with their customers, leaving them with an indifferent and often hostile customer base.
  - Customers expect a minimal service from their energy companies so have little awareness or expectation of additional services.

### 2.2 Awareness and views of PSR services

- There is very low awareness of the existence of the PSR and the services it offers or of free gas safety checks.
  - Suppliers appear to be signing customers up to the PSR without informing them or explaining the services offered, and not following up the process beyond that.
  - Existing promotion is also largely going unnoticed.

### 2.3 The nature of vulnerability

- The nature of vulnerability is complex and not easy to define.
  - Current eligibility criteria for the PSR are appropriate, but it is important that those with mental health conditions, including depression and anxiety and those with learning difficulties are offered services as well (regardless of whether or not they are registered disabled).
- To meet needs, energy companies must communicate the full range of services offered on the PSR to all customers who are identified as vulnerable to ensure they are helping people in different circumstances.

### 2.4 Eligibility Criteria

- Those with chronic illnesses and disabilities, those of very old age and those with mental health issues, (especially if they live alone) have the most specific needs from their energy companies.
  - These groups need to be specifically targeted and informed of the full range of services offered on the PSR.
- Customers prioritise meeting the needs of the most vulnerable over getting more customers on the PSR.

### 2.5 Usefulness of PSR services

- Most PSR services are individually important for particular groups of people, the most important being:
  - Advance warning of power cuts for those dependent on electricity.
  - Large print communications for those with visual impairments.
- Having your meter moved has the most popular appeal, with many of those of pensionable age having mobility difficulties.
  - If this is not possible then having your meter read is an important service.
- Additional useful services are:
  - A free customer service number, well as advice on energy saving and tariffs and reducing energy usage.
  - Communications on audio CD for visually impaired customers.

## 2.6 Communications and branding

- Improving communication and advertising of the PSR is the most important change that can benefit vulnerable customers.
- A telephone dialogue is the best way to identify customer needs and advertise the services available.
  - Although customers rarely phone their energy suppliers unless they have an issue (e.g. with their bill), so getting customers on the phone can be difficult for energy companies.
  - Training for staff could help them identify needs during customer interactions.
  - There was little mention of the appeal of home visits by energy companies to talk about PSR services.
- Getting customers to proactively contact companies about the PSR is extremely difficult and requires them identifying individual services that are relevant to them.
  - Formal personalised letters or distinct, prominent messages on bills are the best ways of getting customers to take notice.
- The best way to present the PSR depends on the groups you want to reach.
  - Targeting those who are most vulnerable requires clear communication emphasising that it is a service for *vulnerable* people. For example, disabled people are used to looking for mentions of services that talk about disabilities and are happy with this language.
  - For mass appeal a more nuanced approach is needed that:
    - Communicates that there are useful services available.
    - Without making customers feel vulnerable or coming across as patronising.
- Whichever approach to promotion is taken, a branding overhaul that is consistent across suppliers and distribution companies is essential to raise awareness of, and interest in the services available.

### 3. Methodology

The findings of this report cover a programme of research conducted over the course of four weeks in April 2013. The research consisted of:

- 24 depth interviews with customers currently registered to either a supplier's or a distribution network company's PSR.
  - Carers and nominated individuals were invited to be present during the interviews. 5 out of the 24 interviews had a carer or nominated person present.
  - 2 Welsh speakers were included in the sample.
- 6 mini-groups with customers eligible for, but not currently registered to, the PSR.
- 6 mini-groups with customers who could potentially benefit from PSR services but are currently ineligible.

#### 3.1 All participants were drawn from a spread across:

- Gender
- Age
- Ethnic group
- Suppliers (where possible, consumers from smaller suppliers were included)
- Rural and urban residents
- Marital status
- Working status
- Those with and without children

Groups and interviews were spread such that each distribution network company (but not region) in Great Britain was represented by conducting groups and interviews in the following areas:

- Exeter
- Andover & Basildon
- Bangor
- Manchester
- York
- Aberdeen

#### 3.2 Those registered to the PSR and those eligible, but not registered were drawn from a spread across those with:

- Physical impairments
- Visual impairments
- Hearing impairments (excluding deaf people)
- Mental health conditions
- Chronic, life-limiting illnesses (e.g. cancer, multiple sclerosis, diabetes)
- Those of pensionable age without an impairment, illness or disability
- Those dependent on electricity for medical reasons

Many of the people that we interviewed represented more than one of the above groups at once (for example of pensionable age and with a chronic illness, or for example a younger person with a mental health condition and a physical impairment).

**3.3 Those registered to a PSR** were drawn from a spread across those who received electricity and gas from different suppliers and those who were on a dual fuel plan. For each relevant area, we interviewed at least one person who was registered to their distribution network company's PSR.

**3.4 Those eligible for, but not registered to a PSR** included a number who were eligible to receive a free gas safety check. Although free gas safety checks are not a requirement of the PSR, they have specific eligibility criteria. Customers fitting the following description are eligible to receive free gas safety checks from energy companies each year:

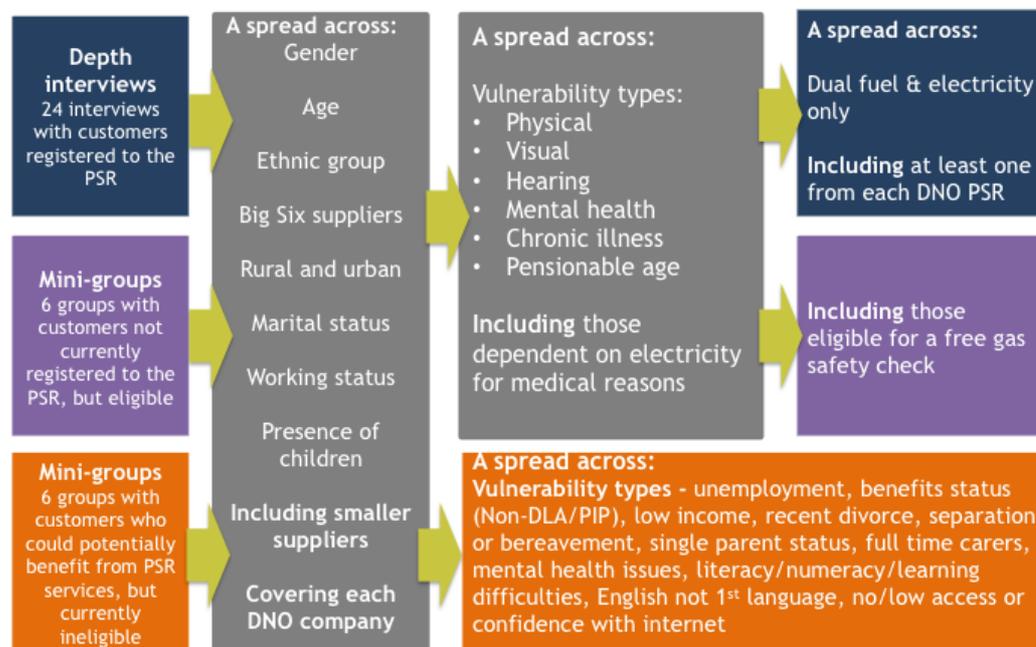
- They own their own home.
- They receive means-tested benefits.
- They have not received a private gas safety check in the last 12 months.
- Another person or organisation is not obligated to make sure they receive a gas safety check every 12 months.
- They are either:
  - Living with a child under 5, or
  - Of pensionable age, disabled or chronically sick
    - Or living with others who are above pensionable age, disabled or chronically sick.

**3.5 Those not currently eligible for the PSR** were drawn from a spread of potential dimensions of vulnerability, including:

- Being unemployed, having benefits status or on a low income.
- Being recently bereaved, divorced or separated.
- Being a single parent.
- Being a full-time carer.
- Having mental health issues (e.g. depression and anxiety).
- Having literacy or numeracy issues.
- Having learning difficulties.
- Having low confidence with or no access to the internet.
- Not speaking English as your first language.

Whilst it wasn't a specific requirement, all non-eligible participants represented at least two of the above factors.

**Fig 1 - Project methodology**



Case studies throughout the report are based on individuals who participated in the research and are real case studies that aim to help illustrate particular points being made. Names used in the case studies have been anonymised.

## 4. Context of the Energy Market

### Key Points

- Energy companies work in an environment where at best, customers are indifferent towards them and at worst, they are extremely cynical.
- The level of negativity towards energy companies largely depends on the level of a customer’s income and/or ability to pay their bills - this dictates the relative burden and stress bills cause - but a negative reaction is also often triggered by an experience of poor customer service.
  - This research covered customers of different levels of income, and those on lower incomes were consistently likely to have more negative attitudes.
- Irrespective of the level of negativity, customers’ relationships with energy companies are remote and primarily transactional - meaning receiving additional services is not expected and rarely considered.

### 4.1 Customers’ views towards energy companies in general

Most customers believe that energy companies make too much profit and, to varying degrees, “rip people off”. Many believe that their motivations are purely financial, describing them as exploitative - extracting as much profit as they can out of customers whilst minimising their own costs, even if that means providing sub-standard services.

It is important to note that when talking about energy companies, customers associate this with suppliers. Whilst the research included customers on their distribution network company’s PSR, there was no knowledge of what a distribution company is, nor that they offered PSR services.

A minority, although not an insignificant one, go as far as believing that energy companies will go to any means to maximise their profits and remain highly distrustful. They believe that, where they can get away with it, energy companies deliberately side step legal requirements and distribute misinformation, ensuring customers pay more for their energy and are not able to hold energy companies to account where they are operating under obligations. Those in particularly vulnerable situations perpetuated by low incomes are likely to have the most extreme views towards energy companies, especially if they have had problems paying bills or debts. However, extreme negative views towards energy companies are not limited to these types of customer.

*“The information you get is full of jargon and is not user-friendly. I think they make it complex so you can’t understand and draw comparisons between companies.”*

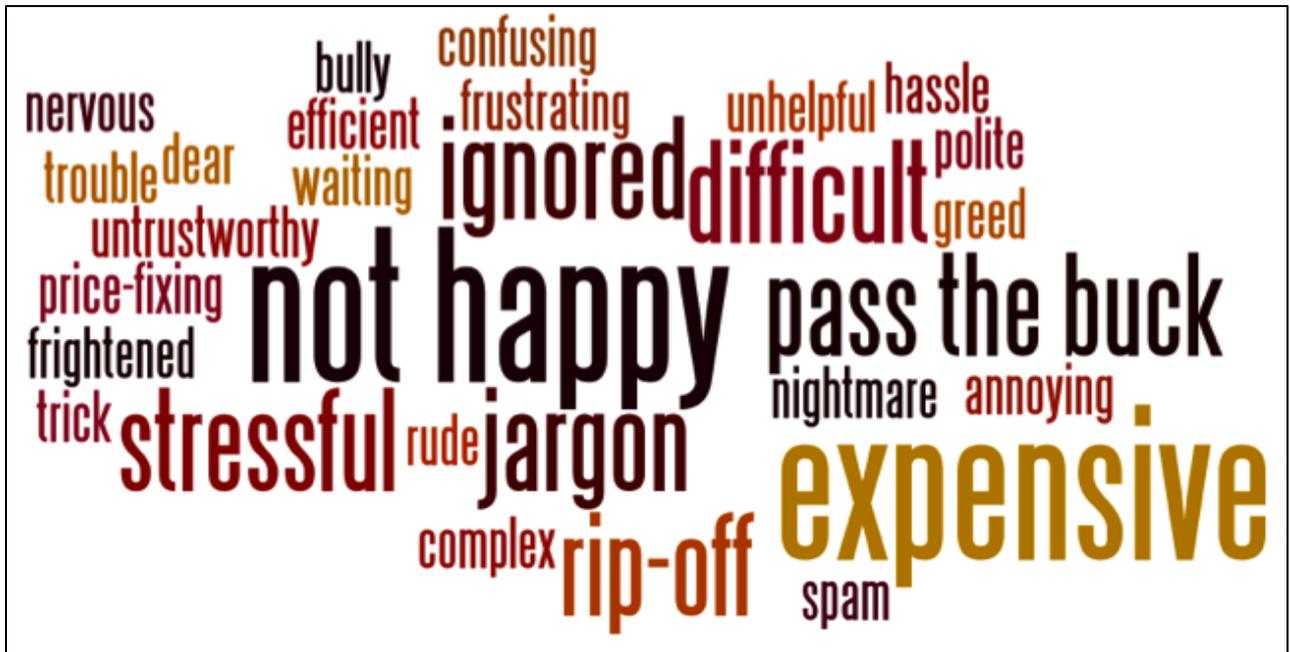
*Non-eligible customer*

When customers speak more positively about energy companies the language they use talks more to a lack of negative feelings than an actively positive stance. The most positive reviews will consist of having never had a problem or a reason to complain, which leaves these customers largely indifferent to energy companies.

Fig 2 shows examples of the language used when we asked customers to describe how they felt about dealing with energy companies and the companies themselves. The larger a word or phrase is, the more often it came up in responses. This language was consistent across

all the customers interviewed, both those who did consider themselves to be vulnerable, and those who didn't consider themselves vulnerable.

Fig 2 - the language customers use when talking about energy companies (which customers associated with energy suppliers)



#### 4.2 Drivers of negativity

Negativity towards energy companies is primarily driven by the rising cost of energy, so those on lower incomes are more likely to have a negative narrative about companies being greedy and immoral. Views are heavily influenced by previous experiences with companies, so the most negative are often those who have had trouble paying bills in the past, although negativity can also be driven by experiences of poor customer service in general.

Those who feel indifferent towards their energy company are likely to be more affluent and to have had very little interaction with their supplier in the past - relationships with energy companies are almost non-existent, so customers don't hold a view on them either way. Those who are indifferent are more likely to be older, and to have been with the same company for many years.

Fig 3 - the spectrum of customer views towards energy companies



### 4.3 The nature of the customer-energy company relationship

Irrespective of the level of negativity customers have towards their energy companies, their relationships with them are broadly the same - i.e. remote and essentially transactional. Many customers never do more than skim their bills when they come through the door and customers usually only contact their supplier to discuss bills or to give meter readings. In general, customers do not want more contact than this, unless there is a major problem that must be resolved and is clearly and *solely* within the energy company's remit.

Given a distant relationship and a lack of motivation to get in contact with energy companies, customers' understanding of their wider responsibilities is quite narrow. For them it is essentially financial - anything to do with bills, and potentially any issues or problems they have with their gas/electricity meter or supply.



*"They don't get in touch apart from bills and reading the meter. I called them once when my bills went up in the summer when I wasn't using as much"*  
*PSR customer*

This narrow view of energy companies' wider responsibilities means that those that require extra help will look anywhere else other than their energy company for additional services that they might need e.g. their housing association, the council, the benefits service, or specific organisations (e.g. SCARF in Scotland) etc. The only situations in which customers with extra needs will contact their energy company proactively for help are where it would be impossible for them to maintain a relationship without it (for example, sending large print communications that relate specifically to a consumer's energy supply). However, in reality, this is a very small number of people and many vulnerable customers have alternatives they rely on, such as having friends or family members that deal with bills and household issues for them.

## 5. The Nature of Vulnerability

### Key Points

- Needs are very individual and can be complex - it is hard for people to define vulnerability in exact terms.
  - In general, but also particularly in relation to vulnerability in the energy market (beyond ability to pay bills).
- Customers living alone, or suffering from depression or anxiety, are more likely to have additional needs and may require a tailored approach.
  - Those living alone have the same energy needs as those not living alone, but have no immediate support network available to help them out.
  - Those with less severe mental health conditions have specific needs - which are applicable generally and also in relation to energy companies.
- For those in the most extreme situations, additional help from energy companies may just be replicating assistance they already get from elsewhere.

### 5.1 The complexity of need

A huge number of variables affect people's everyday needs in their lives both in general and in relation to their energy needs. For vulnerable customers, an illness, disability or impairment can have a significant effect on the level and type of help they need, whether this is contacting a utility company, general household management, understanding and paying bills, or simply getting out of the house. However, relying on basic categories of disability or illness alone to predict needs is misleading - individual circumstances can greatly vary the nature of customers' vulnerabilities, meaning a more sophisticated approach is required.

This is particularly true when looking at needs over time and the interaction between different factors of vulnerability. Degenerative diseases mean an obvious increase in the likelihood of needing certain types of help as time goes on, and as customers get older their likelihood of having an illness, disability or impairment increases (albeit at different rates for different people). But even within a short period of time needs can vary - those with disabilities say they can experience significant variation day-to-day. Certain combinations of vulnerabilities give rise to particular needs and vulnerabilities can be experienced intermittently or as one off issues, meaning that it is difficult to predict needs over time. Customers therefore think that it is important for vulnerable customers to be informed of all the services they are entitled to on the PSR, so that they can use them as and when they need to.

### 5.2 Signposts to vulnerability

Although the needs of vulnerable customers are highly individual, there are certain markers that predict better than others whether or not a customer is more or less likely to have additional needs, both generally in their lives and in relation to their energy company. These are:

- Living alone
- Mental health conditions such as depression or anxiety (especially if on a low income)
- Severity of their impairment/disability/illness/situation

## A - Living alone

Those who live alone are more likely to have unmet needs than those living with a partner or family members. Often those cohabiting with others have developed strategies to cope with difficulties they have - someone with hearing impairments may leave telephone calls up to their spouse or someone with a physical impairment may ask their children to read the meter for example. Those living alone have a less immediate support network to help them with tasks that might otherwise be dealt with easily. The effect that different individual circumstances have on needs means a tailored approach is necessary from energy companies to ensure a customer is happy and satisfied.

### **Case Study - eligible, on a PSR**

David, from Exeter, suffers from cerebral palsy and lives alone in a small flat. He finds it difficult to move around his flat and must use a mobility scooter to get around outside. Living alone, he is mindful of security and likes to remain in control of who he lets into the flat, so he has had an intercom system installed to allow him to talk to people who call at his door from inside.

People knocking instead of ringing the intercom is a constant aggravation and can leave him quite upset and angry - making the whole interaction much more difficult and stressful. This is a particular requirement that must be taken into account if an energy company visits him.

It is also important that he gets advance notice if his energy supply is going to be interrupted so that he can charge his scooter. He could probably go a day without heading to the shops for groceries, but going outside, even for a short while is an important part of his day and gives him independence. Being cooped up in the house can quickly cause him to become aggravated and frustrated.

## B - Mental health conditions

Mental health conditions can ebb and flow over time, for example people can suffer bouts of depression when they find it hard to manage bills, keep on top of paperwork and speak to customer services on the phone.

Having a mental health condition can have a profound effect on the emotional considerations that energy companies must take into account in order for customers to be satisfied with the relationship and their needs be met. Mental health conditions account for a wide range of conditions that can have profoundly different affects on people's lives and the following observations are based on customers whose specific conditions included differing degrees of depression and anxiety. These customers are likely to find dealings with energy companies more stressful and have strong negative feelings towards them, particularly those on a low income who may have struggled with bills or had issues with payments in the past. Due to a lack of trust in many companies, including energy companies, they are more likely to need extra reassurance that their personal details will be treated confidentially and securely. In general they are more likely to be concerned about their own safety during home visits - often requiring specific measures to be taken into account to ensure they feel safe, such as pre-arranged visits and being able to identify who the visitor says they are.

Mental health conditions can also have practical effects that present challenges too - many speak of not opening correspondence that comes in the post for fear of bills (either not being able to pay them, or not being able to face dealing with the paperwork) and not opening doors to visitors. This behaviour can vary from day-to-day or over a period of months, meaning at a given time they may or may not need additional help.

**Case Study - eligible, on a PSR**

Elizabeth lives with her husband and three children in Manchester and has suffered from depression all of her life. She is coping better with it these days, but in the past has gone through severe bouts of depression that have left her incapacitated and unable to take care of herself for any significant period of time.

At the peak of her depression, Elizabeth says there were days when she was unable to get out of bed, and was afraid to answer the door or pick up the telephone. If her husband had not been around, she says she wouldn't have looked at letters coming through the door.

She says that she was daunted by the idea of anyone visiting her house, but that if she was expecting someone it was much easier to cope with than visits 'out of the blue'. She also says that she would have appreciated any security measures that could be put in place that would give her more confidence that the people calling at her door were legitimate.

C - Severe disabilities, impairments or illnesses

Those with the most severe disabilities, impairments and illnesses who cannot go about their daily life without significant levels of assistance are actually often less vulnerable than others when it comes to needs from their energy company. Where there is a significant level of need, customers are likely to already be receiving help from friends or family members, outside carers, independent organisations and neighbours. Whilst their level of need is high, very vulnerable people are happier receiving help from sources they trust rather than from a company such as their energy supplier. When it comes to PSR services, vulnerable customers are likely to already have the help they need in place, and are unlikely to think of turning to their energy company if they need assistance.

**Case Study - eligible, on a PSR**

Marie, who suffers from diabetes, lives in a small bungalow in York with her husband Richard. Marie finds it difficult to move around her house due to physical impairments caused by her diabetes, and her husband has tetraplegia, meaning he requires significant levels of care and cannot be moved around the house without the use of an electronic hoist.

Without help, both of them would find it difficult to deal with issues specifically relating to their energy needs. Marie is unable to reach her meter to read it or do any significant cooking or cleaning without help. Her son comes to help with day-to-day chores and a couple of times a week carers come in to help with more specialised tasks that Richard requires.

Due to the fact that Marie and Richard require significant levels of help, they have adapted so that their regular needs are met by Marie's son and their carers, including those related to energy. If additional needs did arise, they would go to either of these sources first before even considering asking their energy company for help directly.

### 5.3 Customers' own understanding of vulnerability

Even customers that generally define themselves as vulnerable overall, find it hard to settle on a clear definition of what makes people vulnerable *specifically* in relation to energy. Beyond their own experience, and obvious requirements in relation to particular disabilities or impairments (e.g. those with visual impairments being unable to read bills), customers find it a difficult task and qualify their opinions with the caveat that needs in relation to energy will depend heavily on individual circumstances, including their own financial vulnerability. Whilst on the surface many may feel confident that they can identify where a customer may be vulnerable, once individual examples of vulnerability are considered more carefully, many identify a wide range of factors that can affect whether or not an individual has unmet needs.

## 6. Awareness, Experiences and Expectations of the PSR

### Key Points

- Customers have low levels of knowledge and awareness of the PSR - even many of those on the PSR are not aware they have been signed up, and don't know about the range of services offered.
- The research found that energy companies appear to be signing customers up to the PSR after identifying a need, but often do not let customers know they are on a register and rarely explain the range of services available.
- Low awareness, combined with low expectations of services from energy companies, mean the PSR is not helping as many customers as it could. By not informing customers of all the services available to them when they are signed up to the PSR, energy companies are not supporting vulnerable customers as effectively as they could be.

### 6.1 Awareness of the PSR

Awareness of the PSR is almost non-existent across all the different customers - even amongst those who are signed up to it.

At best, PSR customers remember being signed up to a register, but have no idea of what this entails in practical terms and are unaware of how this has impacted their relationship with their energy company since they have been signed up. Many are aware of being signed up for a particular service (e.g. having their meter read), but do not realise that this is part of a wider available service, or that they have been put on a list for those who may have additional needs. This appears to be largely due to energy companies not informing customers about the purpose of the PSR or services offered by it, but also compounded by low (or no) expectations that energy companies would offer extra services for any type of customer.

Awareness of free gas safety checks is just as low - although the concept of a gas safety check is something many are familiar with. This is a service they either expect to pay for (and many do) or is irrelevant because they rent privately and responsibility for maintaining gas safety does not fall with them.

Of the PSR customers we spoke to, none had proactively contacted their energy company to ask to sign up to it. When informed that they were on the PSR and what this entails, many customers were confused or angry that things had not been explained to them before. They were annoyed that they had been excluded from the opportunity to claim additional services they were entitled to, or simply that they hadn't been given the courtesy of being informed that they were being put on a register. The customers who were most negative about energy companies generally interpreted the fact that they hadn't had this service explained as evidence that energy companies were intentionally trying to save money by failing to advertise the service to customers and not telling them about the services they were entitled to.

Vulnerable customers who were eligible but not signed up, along with those currently ineligible were equally unaware of services offered to vulnerable people by energy companies. Consideration that energy companies would offer people extra help was almost non-existent.

### 6.2 Expectations of the PSR

Given low expectations of energy companies and a narrow, remote relationship with them, customers find it difficult to know what to expect from the PSR in terms of 'additional

services'. As they view their relationships with energy companies in almost exclusively transactional terms, they initially imagine these services would consist of ways to help vulnerable customers more easily afford their energy - reflecting the view that it is more important for these customers in particular to be able to stay warm. Specific services they imagined could be offered are:

- Special lower tariffs for vulnerable customers, or help with payments through a system like Winter Fuel Payments
- Extra advice and adaptations to help vulnerable customers reduce their energy usage (including free loft insulation, which may customers we talked to had been offered).

When pushed specifically to think about non-financial services energy companies might provide, the only option customers could come up with was a service that was clearly and solely within the remit of an energy company:

- Priority response in the event of an interruption in the energy supply - meaning priority over other customers to get the supply reconnected and potentially back up energy if the 'power cut' was lengthy

Beyond this very specific service, customers are at a loss as to what to suggest for other non-financial additional services that could be a part of the PSR.

### 6.3 Experiences of the PSR registration

Currently, it appears that customers are being signed up to the PSR without them knowing, rather than being informed of the purpose and full range of services. None of the customers we had talked to had been made aware of the PSR through energy companies' communications, despite the obligation that energy companies have to provide details to all customers at least once a year. Most of them (who were aware they received any additional services) had been signed up when they had phoned up their energy company to try and solve a particular issue (e.g. a damaged meter). During the course of the call, they had mentioned a need that related to a service offered on the PSR (e.g. not being able to bend down to read the meter), without knowing this was a service offered as part of the PSR.

The majority of the time, energy company employees had then offered to provide the specific service that helped with a customer's problem, but had not explained that customers would be signed up to a register, or that they may be eligible to receive other services. Whilst this proactive, ad hoc approach is positive in that companies have matched customers' needs with services offered, meaning a specific pressing need is solved, it has some crucial downsides:

- Given that existing communication does not appear to be getting through to customers, this research found that often the way someone is signed up to the PSR is if they phone up their energy company, and intentionally (or otherwise) communicate that they are a vulnerable customer and have an unmet need.
  - This excludes a potentially large number of customers who need PSR services but do not contact their energy company, or do not communicate that they have unmet needs.
- We found that those who are signed up are not aware that they may be eligible for other services, so other needs relevant to PSR services that are not expressed during their conversation may go unmet.
- Many of those customers who feel they don't require PSR services themselves say they know at least one person who might. However, without a general awareness of

the PSR or the services available through it, the opportunity for word of mouth advertising is missed.

Once customers had been signed up to the register, very few were aware of receiving any follow-up information or confirmation that they had been placed on the register. None reported that they had received anything that sufficiently explained what had happened or outlined the services they may be eligible for.

Many customers signed up to the PSR don't utilise any of the services offered - either because they are unaware they are entitled to receive additional services from their energy company, or because they don't feel they need them. The latter is true for many of those who have been signed up simply because they are of pensionable age. There are some customers who do receive services, but do not realise that these are 'additional' or part of a wider service. For example, having your meter read is seen as something that any customer can request (or indeed something that many energy companies simply do as standard practice, and did not get a sense this was happening more frequently than normal). These customers have so little knowledge of what to expect from energy companies that they do not consider anything they receive as an 'extra' service rather than an individual arrangement with them, so are less likely to enquire whether or not they may be eligible for any others, or to let others who may benefit from them know these services are available.

## 7. PSR Eligibility & Customers' Views

### Key Points

- The current PSR eligibility criteria are seen as broadly appropriate.
- Even though many don't consider themselves vulnerable, pensionable age was considered to be the appropriate time for energy companies to start offering PSR services to customers.
- Customers believe that those with less severe mental health conditions should also be offered PSR services.
- There is consensus - both from these customers themselves and the wider sample - that other vulnerability types outside of the current eligibility criteria would not benefit from current PSR services. Any additional help they can think of is primarily focused on financial help.

### 7.1 Appropriateness of current eligibility

Customers agree in the main that the current criteria for PSR eligibility are appropriate, and do not consider that any groups currently eligible need to be excluded for any reason. Pensionable age is seen as the right time for energy companies to start offering PSR services, as potential to become more vulnerable increases in likelihood with age. In this sense, they see PSR services as being a kind of safety net that can provide reassurance to pensioners in the event they start to need them.

However, many customers of pensionable age don't consider themselves as being particularly vulnerable simply due to their age. Unless they have a specific need in relation to a particular service that would be the responsibility of their energy company, they are unlikely to consider themselves as priority customers or as automatically qualifying for extra services. This also applies to customers who are well into pensionable age, who often refer to others who are 'really vulnerable', for example over the age of ninety, or those with disabilities.

*"I look after my 91 year old neighbour; he would be the type of person who would need this type of thing"*  
*PSR customer*

There is also a matter of pride when it comes to talking about vulnerability and priority needs. Being automatically considered vulnerable upon turning a certain age can be disheartening and even patronising for customers who consider themselves as perfectly able to manage their households as they always have done. This has implications for the positioning of the PSR and any potential branding and language used.

Due to low expectations of energy companies, and low awareness of additional services offered, customers solely of pensionable age are highly unlikely to seek out these kinds of services proactively. On the other hand, once PSR customers already signed up had been made aware of the services they are entitled to, many said they liked the idea of it and would sign up again, for example if they switched energy company. However, this is largely because of the idea of having a safety net should they need it in the future, or because of

cynicism towards energy companies making large profits meaning they would take anything they could get from them, rather than actually needing these services currently.

The implication for energy companies here is that of communication; if PSR services are better and more clearly communicated, more customers are likely to proactively sign up to receive them. However, we did not see a strong uplift in interest in using the PSR services among customers solely of pensionable age even once they had been told about them. Indeed it is likely that even if a customer signs up, they are unlikely to call in these services unless they develop a specific need they have not previously experienced.

## 7.2 Additional eligibility

There is a consensus that one additional eligibility criteria for the PSR might be customers with less severe mental health conditions. Whilst customers with more severe mental health conditions are likely to already be in receipt of an intensive package of care and support, those with milder conditions are less likely to get help from elsewhere and can find it difficult dealing with household management. Energy companies in particular can be daunting to deal with, both due to negative attitudes towards them and also because the most likely reason to be calling is about problems paying bills, confusion about bills, or bills that have increased unexpectedly.

Less severe mental health conditions such as intermittent or low-level depression and anxiety can induce stress and/or apathy. Those suffering from these conditions say that this can make it particularly difficult for them to deal with automated systems, lengthy call waiting times, being put on hold and being passed around between customer services, having to repeat details numerous times.

In addition, those with learning difficulties and numeracy or literacy issues also talk about not having the confidence to deal with energy companies without help.

In both cases, living alone can make it especially difficult for customers to deal with their energy companies, and customers agree that these groups should be eligible for the PSR - particularly with regards to advice in explaining bills and potentially having a specialist phone service to avoid lengthy calls and menu options.

*“By the time I’ve got through after being on hold for half an hour I’m furious and very agitated and I’m already shouting at the person - that’s not good for anybody.”*  
**Non-eligible customer**

It was thought that people living in poor rented accommodation on low incomes could benefit from free gas safety checks from their energy companies, as negligent landlords can fail to offer this despite obligations. It was seen as the obligation of the energy company to find out individual needs and act accordingly.

Whilst other groups of customers are recognised as being potentially vulnerable in some way, including those on low incomes and particularly those with young children, none of the PSR services currently offered are seen as particularly relevant to these groups, either by the groups themselves or from a wider customer point of view. These groups don’t have needs that current PSR services are seen as meeting, as these groups talk about needing financial help rather than practical or other help when it comes to energy.

## 8. Suitability of PSR Services

### Key Points

- Suitability of current PSR services can vary greatly from individual to individual. However, generally:
  - Those with visual impairments require large print communications.
  - Those with physical impairments often require their meter moved somewhere more accessible, or for it to be read by someone else.
  - Those reliant on electricity for medical reasons need advance notice of cuts in supply as far as possible in order to make alternative arrangements.
  - Few would seek out, or feel that they need, energy companies to provide advice on what to do in a power cut.
- Given their low expectations of services from energy companies, customers struggle to think of any new services that they could benefit from being offered and what they do come up with mostly boils down to financial help
- Awareness of the role of suppliers vs. distribution network companies is low, but makes sense to customers once they're informed about this - although customers are indifferent towards who supplies them with services as long as they are supplied

During depth interviews and groups, we presented customers with two lists of services:

1. Mandatory services that currently must be offered on the PSR (we also presented them with the free gas safety check service)
2. Potential services that might be useful to customers, but are not currently mandatory as part of the PSR

We asked all customers about their awareness of these services being offered, their overall views on the services and how useful they felt they would be for *them* specifically as well as others. Recommendations in this section are based on the views of vulnerable customers and their own self-defined needs, as well as consensus reached in discussions about which types of services they think would best help others. Therefore these findings are based on a combination of personal experiences and deliberation among customers.

### 8.1 Suitability of current services

#### A - Bill nominee scheme

**Bill nominee scheme** - If a customer would like their bills or a copy of their bills, to be sent to a friend, relative, or carer's address so the person can read and check their bill, the supplier will arrange this on request



- Most customers don't consider themselves to be vulnerable enough to require this service, feeling it is only necessary for those with more serious needs.
  - However many who currently relied on friends or family members recognised that others in their situation may need this service if they live alone, or even that they themselves may need this service if their needs change in the future.

- Those with dementia are more likely to find it difficult to consistently organise their correspondence, so may need the safety net of having others in the loop to ensure bills are paid on time.
- Those with significant visual impairments who are unable to read large print bills or braille, as well as those with learning difficulties/literacy and numeracy difficulties, may need someone else to read or deal with their bills for them.
- However, many from these groups see this service as unnecessary for *them* as they already have systems in place to ensure someone (carers, partners, friends or family) reads their bills for them.

**Considered most useful for those with:** Dementia, significant visual impairments  
**Also useful for those with:** Learning difficulties/literacy and numeracy difficulties

*“It would be good for a widow on her own if she couldn’t see or didn’t have any friends or family”*  
*Eligible customer*

#### B - Meter Reading



**Meter reading** - If a customer is unable to read their meter, their supplier can arrange for their meter to be read every quarter and bills sent to them based on these readings

- The majority of vulnerable customers and those at risk of being vulnerable feel that they can benefit from this, although there is recognition that the service was more important for those with greater needs.
  - For example, those on low incomes with meters in awkward places were positive about potentially receiving this service, but readily accepted that providing this service to those of pensionable age should be a much higher priority.
- Those with physical disabilities and impairments and pensioners with mobility problems can have difficulty reaching and reading their meter.
- Those with dementia or learning difficulties can find it difficult to fully understand this task or keep track of when it needs to be done.
- Those without physical issues, particularly those on low incomes, simply feel this would be a helpful service for staying on top of bills and avoiding unexpected charges.
- However, even with this service, preparing for a meter reading can be a difficult task for those with physical impairments
  - They may have to clear an area so that someone can read their meter for them, for example if it is located at the back of a cupboard they use for storage.

**Considered most useful for those with:** Physical impairments, visual impairments, dementia, those of pensionable age.

**Also useful for those with:** Learning difficulties, those on low incomes.

*“When they put the gas meters in, they’re either high up or on the floor, and they should be waist level where you can reach them. I have my meters read pretty regularly but sometimes I have to do them myself, and it’s hard to reach”*

*Eligible customer*

**C - Moving meters**

**Moving meters** - If it’s difficult for a customer to reach or read their meter, their supplier can move the meter to a more convenient position



- Many customers we spoke to mentioned they lived in houses where it is difficult to access their meters, or they knew people who had this issue; either directly because they are particularly high up, or low down, or indirectly because they are in places that require things to be moved in order to access them.
- Those with mobility issues, including many of those of pensionable age, can find it hard to either read their own meter or prepare things so that someone can read it for them.
- For convenience, many other vulnerable customers would like to have their meter moved outside and have meter readings taken for them, so they are effectively removed from the process (with the option to check meter readings if they disagree with them).
  - This combination may be more than simply convenient for those with depression or anxiety issues about answering the door.

**Considered most useful for those with:** Physical impairments, those of pensionable age.

*“Yes it would be useful - there are cupboards and things in front of the meter. It’s down low and I can’t reach it very well”*

*PSR customer*

**D - Providing information in an accessible format.**



**Providing information** - Suppliers offer information about any bill they’ve sent or service they offer free of charge to those who are blind or partially sighted

- It is expected that energy companies will provide this service to all customers regardless of how vulnerable they are considered.
- However, this is not a service that many have taken up, even those who may have difficulty accessing information such as those who are blind or partially sighted - customers have limited contact with energy companies in general.
  - The exception to this are those on low incomes who are more likely to call up and discuss help paying their bills.

**Considered most useful for those with:** Customers with visual and hearing impairments

*"I thought they just did that anyway, don't they?"*  
PSR customer

**E - Advance notice if energy supply has to be interrupted.**

**Advance notice if energy supply has to be interrupted** - The companies responsible for the distribution of energy must give customers on the PSR prior notice of any planned outage to the supply of gas or electricity to customers' houses



- This is considered most useful for those who are dependent on electricity for medical reasons e.g. diabetics who must refrigerate insulin, those with stair lifts or mobility scooters to help them get around their house/local area and those requiring oxygen masks.
  - They can plan to go to a friend/family member's house for the duration of the outage.
  - They can charge electrical equipment/find alternative facilities beforehand if possible.
- It is expected that an energy company will notify *all* customers if they can.
  - However, priority should be given to notifying vulnerable customers before others to ensure they can stay warm and make alternative arrangements if necessary.
- Other groups of vulnerable customers said that they would simply use this information to cook food beforehand or plan to be out during the cut.

**Considered most useful for those with:** Those dependent on electricity for medical reasons.

*"I've got a fridge in my bedroom which stores my IV drip... - and that has to be kept at a particular temperature. If the power went to that I don't know how I would manage"*  
PSR customer

F - Advice and information in a power cut



**Advice and information about what to do in a power cut -**  
Distribution network companies also have to give customers advice on what to do in the event of a power cut and confirm when the power will come back on

- For the same reasons as an advance notice of a power cut, this is most useful for those dependent on electricity for medical reasons so that they can make alternative arrangements if necessary.
- As with the advance notice, it is expected that *all* customers would be notified of when the power would come back on if it was a significant power cut, but vulnerable customers should get priority.
- Very few feel that advice on what to do in a power cut is useful - they assume that the measures that they should take are common sense.

**Considered most useful for those with:** Those dependent on electricity for medical reasons.

*“I mean I don’t think people really need to be given advice in a power cut - it’s all common sense isn’t it?”*  
*Non-eligible customer*

G - Password protection scheme

**Password protection scheme -** To make sure a person knows a caller is genuine, customers can agree a unique password with their supplier and distribution network company that will be used whenever their staff visit the person’s home or contact them by phone



- Most vulnerable customers feel they need to be mindful of the threat from those posing as energy company employees.
  - They also recognise that they are more likely to be targeted by criminals if they are vulnerable.
- Some are happy with asking for ID at the door, and say that they would simply forget another password, however many feel that any additional security is welcome.

- The more vulnerable a consumer considers themselves to be, the more likely they are to want this service.
  - Those with depression and anxiety, as well as those living alone, are most likely to feel the threat to them is the greatest.

**Considered most useful for those with:** Those with depression and anxiety, those living alone.

*"I prefer the password option because they're the only person that would know it and people can easily fake ID cards"*  
*Non-eligible customer*

## H - Services for visually and hearing impaired customers



**Services for visually impaired, or hearing impaired consumers -** Suppliers and distribution network companies must provide consumer information, including meter reading and bills, in a format suited to customers with visual or hearing impairments' needs

- Many of those with visual impairments already have systems in place to ensure they had access to information - either partners/families/friends who read correspondence for them or special software to read emails.
  - But this service is crucial for those without that support.
- Those with hearing impairments are usually happy to receive information and correspondence through letters and emails.
- However some with visual impairments say that the general correspondence they receive from companies is usually inadequate:
  - What is classed as large print is still not large enough for those with significant visual impairments.
  - Braille is not considered a widely useful and relevant service given many are not taught how to read it.
  - A few PSR customers mentioned that they had requested large print communications, but not received this service from their energy company, suggesting an issue with compliance.

**Considered most useful for those with:** Visual or hearing impairments.

*"I have repeatedly asked them to send correspondence to me in large print and they never, ever do it. I've told them it's a legal requirement but they never do. It's so frustrating."*  
*Eligible customer*

I - Arranging suitable facilities for blind, partially sighted or hearing impaired customers

**Arranging suitable facilities for customers** - Companies have a general obligation to ensure they have suitable facilities that allow customers with particular needs to make a complaint or an enquiry about companies' services



- Most vulnerable customers do not feel energy companies need to offer any additional service, on top of that offered to customers in general, to enable them to make a complaint or enquiry about services.
  - Although that doesn't affect their belief that this should be an obligation for all companies.
- Customers rejected the idea of face-to-face or Skype meetings - for them, it felt like a level of intimacy with their energy company that was neither necessary nor wanted.
- However those with visual impairments may need to request information about contact methods in large print, Braille or audio CD.

**Considered most useful for those with:** Visual and hearing impairments

*"I suppose the only thing they could do would be to send things through to me on CDs rather than letters - although I don't think they'd do that"*  
**Eligible customer**

J - Notification of the PSR



**Notification of the Priority Service Register:** Suppliers must inform all customers (irrespective of whether they are considered to be eligible) that the PSR exists and the services it offers

- This is widely believed to be an important service for all customers - it is important that customers who might need it are aware of it.
  - The vast majority of customers were surprised that this was a requirement as they were completely unaware of the existence of the PSR and hadn't seen any advertising or information about it before.
  - They felt this was important despite the fact that many didn't feel that they currently needed PSR services themselves.
- It is important that it is advertised at regular intervals (about once a year was felt to be a reasonable length of time) in case they need additional services in the

future.

- This is particularly pertinent for those of pensionable age and those with chronic degenerative illnesses such as multiple sclerosis.
- Ideally customers would be sent something like a small card with a number they can call, which could be pinned to a noticeboard or placed in an obvious place in their homes to remind them of the services available.

**Considered most useful for those with:** Any customer.

*“Once again they’re covering their backs as none of us know about that. I would want to know about it because you might need it later”*  
**Eligible customer**

**K - Free gas safety check**

**Gas safety check** - Gas suppliers can offer a free gas safety check once a year  
**Not a part of the Priority Service Register, but gas companies must offer this to eligible customers**



- Vulnerable customers feel positively towards receiving this service.
  - They feel it was a priority for them personally as it is important that they are able to stay safe and stay warm, and feel reassured that this will be the case.
  - Those identified as being most at risk are those living in poor quality private rented accommodation whose gas systems are more likely to be poorly maintained.
- Those with young children are another group for whom this is particularly important - simply because of the consequences should something go wrong.

**Considered most useful for those with:** Any customer (however particularly those in poor quality private rented accommodation and those with young children).

*“Yeah that’d be useful to make sure my landlord’s done it properly because she hasn’t been good about fixing stuff around the house”*  
**Non-eligible customer**

## 8.2 Suitability of additional services

Energy companies are not currently obliged to offer the services below. Some do however, and other services listed here are ideas for potential new services that are not currently offered by any energy company.

L - Controls and adaptors



**Special controls and adaptors** - Suppliers may provide and fit special controls and adaptors free of charge to make using energy around the house easier e.g. special plugs that are easier to pull out

- This is a popular service with those of pensionable age - many struggle to remove plugs.
  - Reaching radiators low down can be a problem as well.
  - This also affects those with arthritis and those with MS.
- Reaching sockets low down, and getting back up again, is more problematic than the actual removal of plugs or operation of dials/knobs etc.
  - Many say the ideal service for them would be to have sockets and controls repositioned at waist height.
- Most are confident using other controls around their house though, such as knobs for their cooker, light switches, etc.

**Considered most useful for those with:** Those of pensionable age, those with arthritis, those with multiple sclerosis.

*“Because I have arthritis I can’t do some simple things. Radiators particularly are difficult. It would make it much easier”*  
*Non-eligible customer*

M - Knock and wait

**Knock and wait service** - For any home visit, a representative from an energy company will allow longer time than would be normal for a customer to get to and open their front door



- This is most useful for those with mobility problems, including those with conditions such as multiple sclerosis and many of those of pensionable age.
  - Many speak of being stuck in low chairs and taking a long time to get up and answer the door.
- On bad days, those with depression can be drained to the point where it can take them longer than normal to get out of bed to answer the door.

**Considered most useful for those with:** Mobility issues, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, depression, those of pensionable age.

*“On a bad day it can take me a really long time to just to get out of bed and answer my front door”*  
**Eligible customer**

**N - Pre-paid meters**



**Pre-paid meters** - For those who find it difficult to manage their bills energy suppliers can offer to install a pre-paid gas/electricity meter free of charge to help them manage their bills

- There are very divided opinions on the pros and cons of PPMs and the choice is very individual.
- Some say the ease of a direct debit payment is much more convenient and reduces the stress of having to constantly top up gas and electricity. For example;
  - Those with mobility issues in getting to the shop to buy electricity.
  - Those who had not experienced problems paying bills and who had been with the same supplier for many years.
  - Those who simply had never had an issue and prefer not to deal with topping up energy themselves.
  - Those who didn't understand much about PPMs and how they work.
- Others find it a useful way of keeping on top of their bills and monitoring and managing their usage.
  - Those who had experienced problems paying bills or large debts.
  - Those on very low incomes who are afraid of getting into debt.
  - Those simply worried that bills will rise unexpectedly and who have particularly low levels of trust in energy companies.
- This can be an unhelpful service for those with learning difficulties or dementia, who find it easier and more convenient to manage a direct debit.

**Considered most useful for those with:** Those on low incomes.

*“The amount we use because both the son and daughter use a lot of things in the house. You'd be going there, feeding the meter more. But you do know how much you're using and what you're up to”*  
**Non-eligible customer**

O - Calling ahead

**Calling ahead** - Suppliers can call ahead to notify customers of when they are planning to visit their house to read their meter, also allowing them to organise to have a friend/family member/carer present if necessary



- All customers with meters inside their house would find this convenient for scheduling when to be home.
  - Although few felt it would be necessary to have someone with them when it occurred.
- For those with mobility problems, including many of those of pensionable age, this is a useful service if things must be moved to reach their meter.
  - It can take them a long time to clear objects away if they are in a cupboard, or behind objects.
- Those living alone are most likely to worry about their security and to arrange for a friend/family member/carer to be present at the time.

**Considered most useful for those with:** Any customer (however particularly those with mobility problems and those living alone).

*"I quite like this because of the living alone aspect and safety is always an issue - it may be a bit OTT, but I'm wary of opening the door to people I'm not expecting. An ID card can be anybody with a bit of cardboard."  
Non-eligible customer*

P - Back-up generator



**Back-up generator** - For those whose health relies on electricity, a back up generator could be provided to ensure they are not left without it in the event of a power cut

- This could be an important service for those completely reliant on electricity for medical reasons.
  - This includes those who are reliant on mechanical aids to help move around their house.
- However for many of these customers the benefits do not outweigh the perceived difficulties of using it:
  - Many are intimidated by the operation of it, particularly having to top it up with petrol.
  - There were also worries that neighbours would complain of the noise.
- Most feel confident that in the event of a power cut they could rely on a friend or family member to charge medical equipment/refrigerate medicine.
  - However this may not be the case for those who are extremely isolated - socially or geographically - without a support network.
  - Those who are not reliant on electricity share the same reservations about operating it.

**Considered most useful for those with:** Those dependent on electricity for medical reasons.

*“I’m not very good at dealing those kinds of things - and I bet it would make an awful racket.”*  
*PSR customer*

**Q - Specialist helpline**

**Specialist helpline** - For those with particular needs, they can speak to specially trained operators for information or advice, bypassing any automated system and talking face-to-face or via video link if necessary



**Considered most useful for those with:** Hearing impairments.  
**Also useful for those with:** Anxiety issues.

- Those with moderate hearing impairments can find it hard to deal with automated systems - but may be able to use phone systems with operators trained to talk slowly and loudly.
- Those with anxiety issues can find automated systems extremely stressful and find the experience of contacting their energy company frustrating and intimidating.
- This is partially because most of the time they will be contacting their energy companies regarding bills and finances.
- Face-to-face video links are not particularly popular - it is seen as too intimate and most customers would prefer to talk over the phone.
- As a general rule, most customers would prefer to bypass an automated person and talk to an operator directly.

*"I spent a long time on the phone to my previous electric company. My new one says to leave your number and they'll call you back. I think they should all do that. I also got someone's name and the same person to speak to, and a direct line. I thought that was a very good thing to do."*

*Eligible customer*

### 8.3 Customers' ideas for new services

Given customers' low expectations of energy companies, they find it surprising to hear that energy companies provide any additional services such as those offered on the PSR. Customers find it difficult to imagine what energy companies would offer by way of help to vulnerable customers in the first place - and after hearing about the services offered on the PSR, they struggle to imagine what else energy companies could or should offer.

As might be expected, their first thoughts are concerning finance. Many say that they would appreciate advice and measures to help them to reduce their energy usage. Some talk about the appeal of a special lower tariff for vulnerable customers who struggle to pay bills or have higher energy needs, to ensure they stay warm and have the energy they need for medical equipment. However, despite customers saying that a special tariff would be the most useful service energy companies could offer to very vulnerable people, they are sceptical of energy companies ever actually agreeing to this.

Many vulnerable customers, particularly those on a low income, are anxious about the cost of contacting their energy company over the phone and are often put off ringing because of the perceived cost. As a result, a commonly desired additional service is a free phone number that they can call without worrying about being put on hold for long periods of time. Those suffering with anxiety or depression are often especially worried about finance, and are particularly likely to avoid phoning up, even when there is an issue such as a debt that needs to be dealt with.

Those with visual impairments were the only group that identified an additional service that might be useful for them - correspondence on audio CDs. No customers we spoke to with visual impairments could read Braille and there is a question as to how useful it is for others with visual impairments. Audio CDs would allow them to listen to their correspondence without the need for help from family, friends or carers.

### 8.4 The roles of suppliers and distribution network companies

Very few customers are aware that there is a difference between the company that supplies their energy and the company that distributes it - how their energy is provided is simply not an area they have thought about in any depth. Despite having no prior knowledge however, customers can guess the different roles fairly accurately and it is a division that makes sense to them.

When thinking about who should have responsibility for which PSR services, customers assume their suppliers would offer all services. Suppliers are the companies that they recognise; the companies that they pay to provide them with a service directly. They assume all services are provided by suppliers for these reasons. However, when probed, customers feel that, being the companies in charge of energy infrastructure, distribution network companies should take responsibility for letting customers know when there is a disruption to the supply, and when it comes back on.

Ultimately however, customers are indifferent to who provides them with these services, so long as they are provided.

## 9. Prioritising Services

### Key Points

- Rather than one service being more important than others, customers think that *all* services should be better communicated to the *most vulnerable* in order to protect them.
- This is about energy companies meeting all the needs of their vulnerable customers holistically, rather than only meeting a specific need a customer happens to mention on the phone (or that the energy company assumes about them).

### 9.1 Difficulty of defining trade-offs

Customers find it difficult to speculate on people's energy needs beyond financial help or priority status for reconnection if supply gets interrupted. Therefore they find it difficult to definitively decide which PSR services are more important than others - this depends on individual circumstances, and needs cannot be summarised in hierarchical order of priority.

What they talk about is energy companies having an obligation to protect the most vulnerable people in as many ways as they can by offering them a wide range of services within a holistic scheme. It is up to energy companies to identify these groups by proactive communication (and when they are in contact with a customer on the phone) to find out what their particular circumstances are, and which services they would benefit from.

From the customer point of view, it is more important to keep eligibility criteria narrow and include customers with real and current needs, than to offer a diluted service to a wider set of customers who define themselves as having little need for PSR services.

*"Not all those groups should get it. It might take away from people who really need it if I have it."*

*Non-eligible customer*

### 9.2 Exceptions

Different PSR services were felt to vary in usefulness depending on a customer's particular situation. However, when it comes to those who are reliant on electricity for medical reasons, having advance notice of power cuts is an essential service that energy companies must provide and these customers must always take priority above others. On the other hand, giving advice about what to do in the event of a power cut was not seen as a necessary service and one that could easily be dropped, as this was considered to simply be common sense. The most important thing for energy companies to do is to inform customers reliant on medical equipment if a power cut is due to happen and how long this will last, in order for customers can make alternative arrangements themselves.

*"I wouldn't phone up for advice because I think most people know what to do. It's common sense."*

*Non-eligible customer*

### 9.3 Implications

Implications for energy companies from the customer point of view, is that it is important to both identify vulnerable customers and establish their needs when a customer is on the phone, and to inform them of *all* the services offered on the PSR to understand which ones they would benefit from. This would be a much more effective and worthwhile service than simply responding to an individual service a customer enquires about at one particular time, which many say is the reality at the moment.

#### Levels of need for PSR services depend on circumstance *and* vulnerability type:

The diagram below summarises different levels of need for PSR services among different types of vulnerable customers. This includes both customers who are currently eligible and those with less severe mental health conditions who are not currently eligible, as they are not registered disabled. It identifies a core group of customers who do or could potentially benefit the most from PSR services. These are customers who have less severe mental or physical conditions (in addition to or aside from being of pensionable age) who have current needs that the PSR can meet, that they don't receive help with from elsewhere.

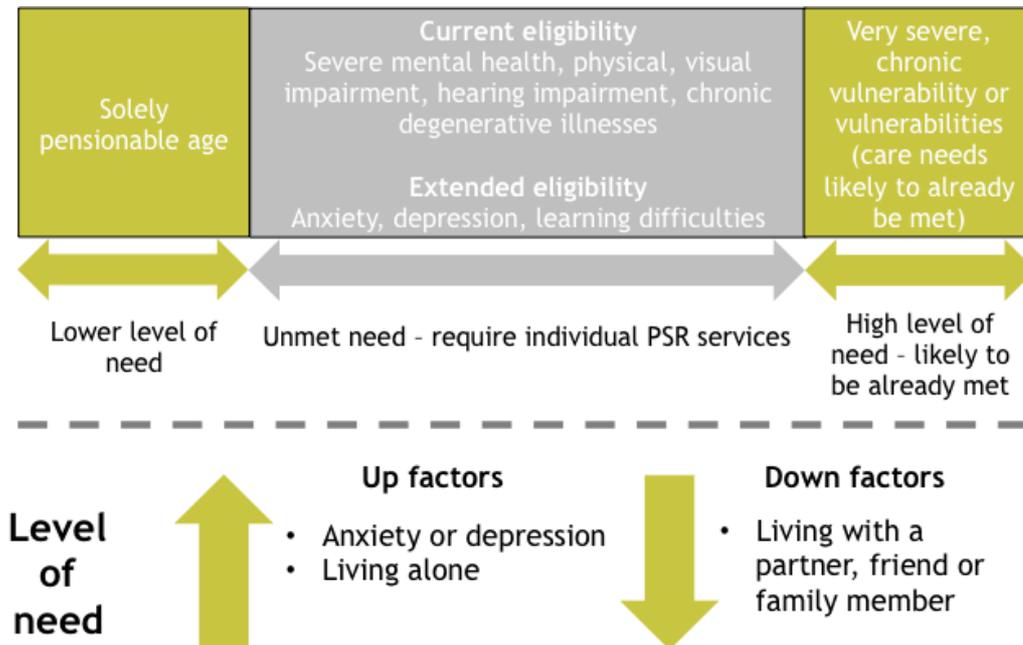
Customers solely of pensionable age with no mental or physical disabilities (those to the left of the diagram in fig.4) agree that they are unlikely to use any of the services, as their needs for these services are currently low. However, they like the idea of being on the PSR as a safety net if needs arise.

Across these two groups, need for services are likely to be heightened if a customer suffers from anxiety or depression or if they live alone. Conversely, needs are lowered if they have someone living with them or who helps them deal with household issues, including energy needs.

Customers who are in very severe states of vulnerability are likely to already have a full care package in place. Therefore while the customer has current and immediate needs (including in relation to energy) these are likely to be already being met (e.g. the carer will deal with bills and meter readings etc.) and customers in these situations often have little need (or no longer have need) for PSR services. Although this may be the case, anyone in this 'high level of need' category must continue to have the choice to access PSR services if required. This could be either for the benefit of their carers who may have their own requirements, or because the individual wishes to live a more independent lifestyle, which includes managing their own energy needs.

As you move from the left to the right of the diagram, vulnerability becomes more complex and multi-dimensional, and if a person also lives alone or suffers from anxiety or depression, the need for PSR services increase. Up to a certain level of severity of vulnerability, the PSR services can benefit the customer effectively, after which the services offered on the PSR will likely be taken care of by someone else such as a carer. At this point, PSR services might no longer be effectual for the individual customer, although it is important that they are still offered these services should this not be the case.

Fig 4 - Level of need and the factors that affect it



## 10. Communications

### Key points

- Awareness of the PSR is very low, as are levels of knowledge of what the PSR is or the services offered.
- Communication is largely not reaching the intended audiences, or is not having much impact if a customer does read information about it.
- Motivation to sign up depends on having a pressing and current need in relation to the PSR services offered, that a customer recognises they have.
- Various names for the PSR are not resonating strongly with customers, possibly due to low expectations as well as awareness.

#### 10.1 Low awareness and understanding

Very few customers imagine that energy companies offer any extra services outside energy supply - and they certainly don't know about any obligations energy companies have. This is compounded by low expectations and lack of communication from energy companies. Some PSR customers do have a vague notion of some sort of 'priority list' but they tend to have come by this information from someone other than their energy company (e.g. word of mouth or AgeUK).

It is true to say that many customers do not look at or read communications they get through the door. This is not exclusive to energy companies, although it does relate particularly to them due to very low levels of engagement in this market. Whilst it may be that many customers simply don't read communications they get, this is not true for all; even those who said that they read all the information they receive were still unaware of and unclear about the PSR.

#### 10.2 Need for clearer communications

Effective communication is about proactively offering the full range of services to customers when they need it, rather than passively signing a customer up to the PSR without their knowledge and with no real explanation. Letters and leaflets are rarely read and (if so) not in detail, and customers are unlikely to keep materials for later use. Even if customers do read information they receive, the section on the PSR appears to be being lost in the mass of other information on the page.

*"Small print can sometimes be ignored. They use that as a get out of jail free card."*  
**Eligible customer**

When it comes to communications about the PSR, customers are likely to only take notice if they see a specific service that relates to a difficulty they are currently experiencing. For example, it could be they are having difficulty in accessing their meter, and therefore specific information about a service to move the meter or read the meter more often, would be more likely to catch their attention than talking in notional terms about a Priority Services Register. Customers aren't looking for information on extra services from their energy company; therefore communications need to be specific and clear.

However, there is a tension in written communications between displaying a full range of services to catch customers' attention and not overloading communications, causing people to switch off or ignore it. Customers agree that the best way to overcome this would be for energy companies to identify individual needs of customers over the phone when they call or when an energy company needs to call them, and explain the services available. This could then be followed by a letter or leaflet that they would be looking out for, be more likely to read and could refer back to when necessary.

For this to happen, training employees to offer a full range of services and effectively identify customer needs is important in order to sign up the right customers and meet (all of) these needs holistically.

Second best to a phone conversation are personalised letters to customers (distinct from a leaflet with their name on) or very clear, prominent information on a bill - somewhat more likely to be read and noticed than leaflets, booklets or emails.

Currently, unnoticed (and perceived inadequate) communications about the PSR means that when customers found out about the existence of these services, they assumed energy companies were deliberately hiding information to avoid spending money.

#### Case study - eligible, on the PSR

Miss McDonald, of pensionable age from Aberdeen, lives alone in a Housing Association flat and keeps meticulous records of all correspondence from her energy company. She was vaguely aware of "some kind of service" being offered.

In November 2012, she had phoned her energy company as one of her neighbours had realised the tenants were paying for communal electricity - which was the responsibility of the housing association. The conversation and outcome with the supplier was satisfactory. However, two months later she was sent a personalised letter informing her of her company's PSR. The letter was two sentences long, and consisted only of the name of the PSR and a phone number to call. It did not inform her that she had been put on the PSR, nor what this entailed.

Given her apathy towards contacting her energy company, she had not phoned the number to enquire about it, feeling that "I've got this far, I really can't be bothered to find out more". Once informed, she was very concerned she had been registered for the PSR without being explicitly told so, and highly confused as to why she had not been informed of any of the services offered. She was particularly interested in the plugs and adaptors services, but would have been more interested in advice on her central heating system and potential efficiencies, as she had "no idea if the system I have is a good one or if it's costing me lots of money I could save".

### 10.3 Being informed of the PSR

Once informed of the full extent of the PSR services offered by energy companies, customers do think this is a positive initiative for them to offer, and they were then able to comment on which were relevant to them. However, most services offered are seen to relate to only the most vulnerable types of people that could not cope without them.

Indeed it was only the most vulnerable customers interviewed that classed themselves as really needing the services offered. Customers without a pressing need did not feel they qualified for (or would benefit from) any of the PSR services, and expressed low inclination to sign up.

As a concept, having a Priority Services Register for vulnerable customers is seen as positive. However, because customers are not being informed of the range of services offered, energy companies are not seen as caring about vulnerable customers. Instead, they are seen as being reactive and unforthcoming in support, trying to hide from their obligations in order to save money.

*If you're notified and you know what's offered then you have the choice to ask about what's there, but if you don't know about it then that's taken away from you."*  
**Non-eligible customer**

On being informed of being on the PSR, some customers were surprised, saying they didn't feel they needed to be on it and weren't sure why they had been signed up. A small number said they felt positive about being on the PSR, 'just in case' they needed it. Most PSR customers interviewed said they would sign up again if they moved suppliers - but only once they had been informed of the services offered. However, those not on the register were less inclined to go through the process of signing up - both because they didn't feel they needed any particular one of the services and because contacting energy companies is seen as a lengthy hassle and of low priority unless a particular problem needs to be addressed.

Despite customers feeling generally positive about such a service being offered, overall attitudes towards energy companies are unlikely to shift even if awareness does increase.

#### 10.4 Reactions to names

Whilst some energy companies have different names for their Priority Service Registers, recognition of any of these names is low. Some had a vague recognition of being on some kind of 'priority' list, but it wasn't clear what this was. Where some had heard of a particular name there was confusion as to what this was - some thinking this was the name of an independent private helpline service for older people.

Opinions on the names are divided and none clearly explains what the PSR service is for, or what it entails. Those with more severe vulnerabilities such as chronic disabilities are less sensitive about a more direct approach by energy companies, as they are used to actively looking for services designed to meet their needs, and are comfortable with words like 'disability' or 'vulnerable'. However, a 'patronising' label puts those who do not consider themselves as qualifying for special services, off. The word 'care' for example, can come across as patronising.

The word 'priority' does make intuitive sense given the nature of the PSR service, but again, without explanation it is not clear to customers what this would mean for them or who it would be for specifically. Customers agreed that given how little they knew about the service, and given their low expectations of energy companies, it was important to have a common name for the register to increase awareness and understanding. This in turn would help to increase transparency in terms of the obligations energy companies have towards vulnerable customers.

*“I think they should have the same names because you tend to get forgetful as you get older and it would just be confusing”*  
*Eligible customer*

### 10.5 Transferring details and data security

Automatically transferring customer details between energy supply or distribution companies, for example if a customer switches supplier, is seen to be a positive concept. However, vulnerable customers often need extra reassurance about data security due to heightened fear of data being misused; this is especially so for energy companies as they score low on trust. Vulnerable customers are also more likely than others to be at home during the day, and often mention being inconvenienced by excessive marketing calls, which can increase scepticism and concern about data security.

Customers unanimously agree that all energy companies should ask customers for their permission for anything they do - including signing people up for the PSR and in transferring data to another supplier or distributor - before they do it. If permission is asked upfront, then theoretically, sharing data between suppliers and distributors is viewed positively. However, vulnerable customers need absolute reassurance that their data will be kept safely and used responsibly.

*“It’s not OK to automatically transfer details between suppliers - it is a courtesy to ask people to do this”*  
*PSR customer*

*“I wasn’t told about it or given a choice, but they should ask you for permission about using any of your details or putting you on any list”*  
*PSR customer*

## 11. What Makes Vulnerable Consumers Different

There is a large amount of homogeneity in terms of attitudes towards and expectations of energy companies and the services they provide, however, over the course of this research, and based on other findings from BritainThinks' experience, there are a number of important areas in which they diverge from the common view.

### Attitudes towards energy companies

Very vulnerable customers on low incomes are likely to have extreme negative views towards energy companies, particularly if they have been in debt or the company has proven obstructive to them (e.g. not moved their meter after asking). If they have a very negative attitude, they are more likely to believe all energy companies are the same, are unreasonable and out to rip people off.

Vulnerable (particularly older) customers can feel like they are being fobbed off by energy companies, and that the attitude towards them is patronising, and that customer services deliberately treat them differently (e.g. not explaining things clearly or offering them the best options) due to their age, impairment or disability. However, many simply find it hard to judge whether they are being fairly treated or not.

### Finances and switching suppliers

They are less likely to want to, or be able to compare tariffs among different energy companies (due to complacency or limited access / confidence in using the internet) and are therefore very unlikely to switch between suppliers. Because of lack of consideration of switching, many have little idea of what an 'average' tariff would be and if what they are paying is much higher than what they could get (for example, one customer was paying £200 a month for gas in a one-bedroom flat and had no idea if this was high or low).

Vulnerable customers are also more likely to stick with a tariff/energy company even if they think they are paying above the odds, due to the belief that even if you switch to a lower tariff, this will go up shortly after the initial offer - the hassle of switching isn't worth it.

### Needs related to energy and energy companies

Vulnerable customers are likely to be at home during the day and often experience excessive marketing calls. This can lead to a heightened concern about data protection and security that can manifest itself when dealing with energy and other companies. They can be more concerned about physical security than other customers, for example when a representative comes to read a meter that is indoors, and many have considerable practical considerations, such as reaching and reading their meter, due to disabilities, mobility or eyesight.

Those with less severe mental conditions including less severe cases of depression and anxiety (currently ineligible for the PSR if not registered disabled) express strong issues with both having to call energy companies in the first place, and having to go through lengthy menu options and waiting times. This can be intimidating as well as increase anxiety and stress, with customers admitting that they are overly angry before they even get to speak to a customer services agent. For these customers, a direct phone line that is free of charge is something they say would help them the most.

## 12. Key messages

Ofgem's principal objective is to protect the interests of existing and future gas and electricity consumers, in line with its statutory duty to have regard to the interests of particular groups of consumers, and has committed to developing a new Consumer Vulnerability Strategy.

This research was commissioned to understand more about vulnerable customers and potential vulnerable customers and experiences and expectations around Priority Service Registers. The following section outlines our suggestions to help inform Ofgem's review of suppliers' and distributors' PSRs and additional support that is made available to different kinds of vulnerable energy customers.

### 1. Focus on recruiting the most vulnerable onto the PSR and offering them full services, rather than limiting services to allow recruitment of more customers on to the register.

- Customers across the sample favoured depth of offer to fewer customers over breadth of support for more, less vulnerable customers.

### 2. Maintain current eligibility and extend and clarify mental health eligibility - including less severe cases of depression and anxiety, as well as eligibility for those with learning difficulties.

- Customers facing these types of vulnerability agreed that they would benefit from PSR services themselves. This was also a conclusion developed in discussion by the wider sample.

### 3. Tell suppliers that they need to explain to customers that they are being signed up to the register, run through all of the services offered and then follow up their contact with a personalised letter that customers can keep.

- Customers agreed that they needed to know about the full extent of services offered on the PSR to be able to choose which were most relevant to their needs. The letter needs to list which services are available, so that the customer can require additional services if their needs change over time.

### 4. Suggest a brand overhaul to suppliers and distributors, concentrating on making advertising and communication clearer and more easily understood.

- Communication about the PSR needs to stand out separately from other communications, as it is currently getting lost. Explanation of the purpose of the PSR and the range of services offered needs to give customers much more clarity.

### 5. Create a single name for the PSR (adapting it depending on whether you opt for a focused service or try for wider appeal).

- Consensus reached in this research suggests a more tightly defined PSR service would be more affective than one aimed at a wider set of customers, and there

was agreement on the need for one single name that customers recognised and understood.

**6. Let suppliers know they must engage in telephone conversations with customers and recommend specially training operators so that they are knowledgeable about the full range of services and able to identify customers' needs.**

- This is about understanding the individual customer by talking to them directly (either when the customer calls or when the energy company needs to call them about an issue) and giving the customer the choice of which PSR services they would like to utilise.

## APPENDIX 1: Recruitment specification

### PSR Customer Depths (24 interviews):

#### Supplier/DNO quotas

Across all areas

- 12 male, 12 female
- 1 from relevant DNO PSR for each area
- At least 2 from each of the Big Six
- At least 1 from each of the smaller suppliers that have provided sample (N.B. this will be an aim, many have only provided 1, so we'll do as well as we can)
- Min 18 are aware they are on a PSR (potentially under another name) and have used services on it
- Good mix of dual fuel and electricity only
- Include BME groups

#### Vulnerability quotas

Across all areas

- Min 3 of pensionable age without any other vulnerability
- Min 3 of pensionable age AND another vulnerability (Max 13)
- Min 3 of physical disability or impairment
- Min 3 of visual impairment
- Min 3 of hearing impairment (must be able to conduct interview)
- Min 3 of mental disability or impairment
- Min 3 of chronic, life-limiting illness
- Min 3 dependent on electricity for medical reasons
- Good spread of ages amongst those under pensionable age

### PSR eligible non-customer mini-groups (6 mini-groups of 4, 24 in total)

#### Supplier quotas

Across all areas

- 12 male, 12 female
- Min 3 from each of the Big Six
- Max 4 from other/don't know

Within each group:

- Max 2 from any one supplier
- Max 1 other/don't know

#### Vulnerability quotas

Across all areas (overlap allowed within bounds set out)

- No-one on a PSR
- Min 3 of pensionable age without any other vulnerability
- Min 3 of pensionable age AND another vulnerability (Max 13)
- Min 3 of physical disability or impairment
- Min 3 of visual impairment
- Min 3 of hearing impairment (must be able to conduct interview)

- Min 3 of mental disability or impairment
  - Excluding learning difficulties
- Min 3 of chronic, life-limiting illness
- Min 3 dependent on electricity for medical reasons
- Min 3 eligible for free gas safety check, which means all of the following applies to them:
  - They own their own home
  - They receive means-tested benefits
  - They have not received a gas safety check in the last 12 months
  - Another person is not obligated to make sure they receive a gas safety check every 12 months
  - They are either:
    - Living with a child under 5, or
    - Elderly, disabled or chronically sick
      - And live with others who are elderly, disabled or chronically sick
      - Or others who are under 18
- Good spread of age amongst those under pensionable age

Within each group

- Max 2 people with the same vulnerability in any group

## PSR ineligible customer mini-groups (6 mini-groups of 4, 24 in total)

### Supplier quotas

Across all areas

- 12 male, 12 female
- Min 3 from each of the Big Six
- Max 4 from other/don't know

Within each group:

- Max 2 from any one supplier
- Max 1 other/don't know

### Vulnerability quotas

- No one of pensionable age, disabled or long-term condition (except mental health or learning difficulty - see below)
- Min 2 vulnerable due to financial reasons (unemployment, benefits status, low income)
- Min 2 vulnerable due to personal reasons (recent divorce or separation, recent bereavement)
- Min 2 vulnerable due to single parent status
- Min 2 vulnerable due to being recent care leavers
- Min 2 vulnerable due to being full time carers
- Min 2 vulnerable due to mental health reasons (but not registered disabled because of mental health problems)
- Min 2 vulnerable due to problems with literacy / numeracy and/or learning difficulties
- Min 2 vulnerable due to not having English as the first language spoken at home
- Min 2 vulnerable due to no internet access and low confidence in using internet
- All must fit at least two of the above descriptions
- Aim to get a good spread within each group

## Across, eligible and ineligible mini-groups

- Aim to get a good spread of:
  - Age (for those not specified as being pensionable age or above)
  - Presence of children
  - Working status
  - Marital status
  - BME
  - Urban/suburban/rural

## Appendix 2: Discussion guides

### Eligible customers not on a PSR

#### Discussion Guide

| Section                               | Discussion Guide   |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| <p>Introduction and circumstances</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to BritainThinks and moderator, and description of the project working in partnership with Ofgem</li> <li>• Check any individual needs are understood and accounted for so that everyone can participate fully in the group</li> <li>• Explain confidentiality and anonymity</li> <li>• Ask permission to record</li> <br/> <li>• Tell me a little about your life, your family, what you enjoy doing</li> <li>• How would you describe your lifestyle? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ How has this changed over time?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• What sort of obstacles do you encounter in your daily life?</li> <li>• Probe if appropriate: How does this make you feel?</li> <li>• Is Welsh your first language? Do you speak it over English in your day-to-day life? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Does this present any barriers in your daily life?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• How well do you feel that you cope with the obstacles you encounter in your daily life?</li> <br/> <li>• What, if anything, do you feel you need extra help with?</li> <li>• Do you have friends or family that help you out? What do they do? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>BRING IN CARER/HELPER IF PRESENT AND WILLING TO PARTICIPATE:</b> Are there any other ways in which you help?</li> </ul> </li> <br/> <li>• What are the first three words that come to mind when you think about dealing with companies that provide you with water, gas and electricity?</li> <li>• How do you feel about dealing with them generally? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Is there anything in particular that you struggle with when you deal with them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>IF APPLICABLE:</b> Does having Welsh as a first language present any issues?</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ How would you describe the way these companies deal with you? How far, if at all, do they help you overcome any difficulties you may have? Probe on non financial help</li> <li>○ Probe if appropriate: How does that make you feel?</li> <li>○ How does this compare with other companies or organisations you deal with, e.g. banks, the council, telephone / internet companies, etc?</li> </ul> </li> <br/> <li><b>If carers/helpers present and willing to participate:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you help dealing with water, gas and electricity companies? If so, how? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Do you help out with the process of dealing with bills in any way?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul> |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Broad experiences and expectations of interactions with energy companies</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What sort of contact have you had with the companies that have been involved in providing your gas and electricity?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Has this been positive or negative? Why?</li> <li>○ How did they contact you/you contact them?                 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>IF APPLICABLE:</b> Was this conducted in Welsh or English? How did this affect how positive the experience was?</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Did you get what you wanted to out of it?</li> <li>○ Was it how you expected it to be? What did you expect?</li> <li>○ How could it have been made better or easier for you?                 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>IF ONLY FINANCIAL:</b> Are there any ways it could have been improved other than through saving you money or helping you reduce your energy use?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>• Have you had any other contact with your energy providers?</li> </ul> <p>(By contact we mean any sort of contact, either to or from your energy company. This could be via the phone, via letters between you or leaflets that they have you sent you through the post, face-to-face, via email or online in some other way.)</p> <p>PROBE ON:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Paying your bill</li> <li>○ Giving meter readings</li> <li>○ Looking for information or advice because you have a question or query</li> <li>○ Conversations with sales people</li> <li>○ Making a complaint</li> <li>○ Switching supplier or tariff, or changing the way you pay</li> <li>○ Getting practical help with something e.g. having your meter moved so you can easily access it?</li> <li>○ Power cuts</li> </ul> |
|--|--|

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Service providers and other helps received</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which gas and electricity companies are you aware of?</li> <li>• Are you aware of the difference between the companies that sell you your gas and electricity and those that distribute it to your area? What is the difference? How do you think this works?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Do you know the names of the companies that distribute gas and electricity to your area?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>N.B. EXPLAIN ROLE OF DISTRIBUTORS IF NECESSARY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What sort of help does <i>your</i> energy provider currently offer you?</li> <li>• Do you know the names of the companies that distribute gas and electricity to your area?</li> <li>• Do you think that there any differences in the way that different gas and electricity companies deal with their customers? Do you know if any offer more help than others?</li> <li>• What kind of help might they offer?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Probe on...</li> <li>○ finding the best tariff for you, or helping you to reduce the amount of energy you use.</li> <li>○ any help that isn't about saving you money or helping you to reduce your energy use</li> </ul> </li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>Upfront experience and views of PSRs</b></p>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What sorts of free services have you heard of energy companies offering people with particular needs e.g. older people or those who are disabled?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>IF ONLY FINANCIAL:</b> Have you heard of any free services that aren't to do with saving you money or helping you to reduce your energy use?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Probe fully for spontaneous awareness before exploring prompted awareness:</p> <p>Energy companies are required to maintain registers of customers with particular needs and offer special services to those customers based on their needs. These are often called Priority Service Registers, but can also be schemes known as Carefree, Careline or Warm Response. People of pensionable age, people who have a disability or have a long-term illness are currently the only people that qualify to go on the register. Being on the registers for these schemes may entitle you to services such as such as having your bill sent to a family member or friend, help reading your meter, or a doorstep password scheme.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has anyone heard of anything like this?</li> </ul> <p><b>For those who are aware/have seen it publicised:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What have you heard/seen?</li> <li>○ Where did you hear/see this?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ If necessary prompt on: leaflet, bill, company website</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Do you know any particular names for these services?</li> <li>○ Has any one heard of any of these (Priority Service Register, Carefree, Careline, Warm Response)</li> <li>○ What kinds of services have you heard that they offer?</li> <li>○ Based on what you saw, was it clear that you were eligible to be on a PSR? Why/why not?</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did you ask anyone or go anywhere to get more information on the PSR?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Where did you go/who did you ask? Why?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Has anyone contacted their energy company themselves or through a friend</li> </ul> |

|   |   |
|---|---|
|   | <p>or family member to discuss registering for a PSR?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Why/why not?</li> <li>○ If yes, what response did you get? What stopped you from being put on the register?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What could have changed so that you were put on the register?</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ If no, what could have changed that would have made you ask to be put on a PSR?</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Have you contacted your energy company about anything else that you needed help with? What was the response?</li> <li>● Why aren't you on a PSR? Probe around all barriers</li> </ul> <p><b>For those who are unaware:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How could the companies have communicated information about the services offered so that you were more likely to be aware of it?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Probe on communications being Welsh</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Are there any methods of contacting you that are better or worse than others? Why?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Prompt on letters, leaflets, communications at the bottom of bills, websites</li> </ul> </li> <li>● What would have been the best way for you to get in contact with your energy company?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Prompt on email, letter, telephone, through the website</li> <li>○ Where would you go to look for information on PSRs, the services they provide and who is eligible to register for one? Prompt on helpline, website, bills and annual statements, information sent via email or post</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>It could be possible for energy suppliers and distributors to share your information about being registered to the PSR and the needs that you have so that you are automatically added to a register for anyone providing you with energy e.g. details being shared when you switch supplier or being given to your distribution company so that they can offer support, for example if there is a power cut in your area</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How do you feel about this data being automatically shared as opposed to you asking your energy companies individually to be put onto a register?</li> <li>● What choices should you be given the first time you sign up to the PSR?</li> <li>● If you switched energy supplier would you want to be automatically transferred to the new supplier's PSR?</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Views on current services offered on PSRs</b></p> | <p>Here is a list of the types of services energy companies currently offer to customers on their Priority Service Registers. Some of these are services all energy companies have to offer, others are additional services some companies offer voluntarily.</p> <p><b>MODERATOR DISPLAYS AND READS OUT LIST OF EXAMPLES OF MANDATORY AND ADDITIONAL SERVICES OFFERED ON PSRs AND FREE GAS SAFETY CHECKS ONE AT A TIME</b></p> <p><b>Going through each:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Would this be useful to you? Why/why not?</li> <li>● [Referring back to difficulties raised at the beginning of the group, where relevant] Earlier you said you found xx challenging, how would this service make a difference to you?</li> <li>● Is this an important service? Why?</li> <li>● Would it be particularly important for other groups of people?</li> </ul>  |

|  |   |
|--|---|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Which other types of people? Why?</li> </ul> <p><b>Considering all of them together:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Which of these are the most important to you? Why?</li> <li>● Which of these are the least important to you? Why?</li> <li>● Are there any that are mandatory that shouldn't be? Why?</li> <li>● Are there any additional ones that should be mandatory? Why?</li> <li>● Have any of these surprised you? Why/why not?</li> <li>● Which of these would you <i>expect</i> an energy company to do? Which wouldn't you? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Is there anything you would expect them to offer that we haven't covered?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Earlier we mentioned that there are different types of companies in the industry - distributors and suppliers. Do you think that some of these should be offered by one and not the other? Why do you say that?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Are there any you would expect to be offered by a distributor and not a supplier, or vice versa?</li> <li>● Thinking about the challenges we talked about earlier, what other services could energy providers offer that would personally make your life easier? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>IF ONLY FINANCIAL:</b> Could they offer any services that aren't to do with saving you money or helping you to reduce your energy use?</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Considering the mandatory and additional services offered that we have discussed, how do they make you feel about energy companies that offer them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Would this change if they offered any of the new services that aren't currently offered?</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Considering all of the services we have discussed how do you feel about registering to be on a PSR? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What reasons would you have for registering for one? What might stop you?</li> <li>○ How likely is it that you will register for one in the future? Why is this?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
|--|---|

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Views on eligibility criteria</b></p>            | <p>Here are some lists of customers who are currently eligible to be on PSRs and receive the sorts of services we have just talked about</p> <p><b>MODERATOR DISPLAYS AND READS OUT LIST OF PSR ELIGIBLE CUSTOMER GROUPS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you feel about PSRs being offered to these groups?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Do all of these groups need this kind of support?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• How do these eligibility criteria make you feel about PSRs?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ How do they make you feel about the companies that offer them?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Here are some groups who are currently not eligible for support, but who could potentially benefit from some kind of support:</p> <p><b>MODERATOR DISPLAYS AND READS OUT LIST OF NON-PSR ELIGIBLE CUSTOMER GROUPS, INCLUDING HAVING WELSH AS A FIRST LANGUAGE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you feel about additional services being offered to these groups?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Do all of these groups need the services offered on PSRs</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Would including these change the way you feel about PSRs or the companies that hold them?</li> </ul> <p><b>Looking at all of them together</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there any important groups that have been missed?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Why is it important that they are included?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Energy providers' comms and data sharing</b></p> | <p>These registers have different names for different companies - some call them PSRs, some Careline, Carefree or Warm Response.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are any of these names better than others? Why?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Do any make more sense as a name for these kinds of services than others?</li> <li>○ Do they make you feel more or less positive about signing up to them? Why?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• How do you feel about the companies having their own names for the registers, rather than all calling it the same name?</li> </ul> <p>Here are some examples of materials you might be sent if you were interested in being registered to a PSR.</p>   |

|  |   |
|--|---|
|  | <p><b>MODERATOR HANDS OUT SOME EXAMPLES OF LARGE PRINTED STIMULUS FROM ENERGY PROVIDERS AND EXCERPTS EXPLAINING PSRs FROM WEBSITES, READING OUT INFORMATION WHERE POSSIBLE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are your first thoughts on these?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What is good about them? What is less good?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• How easy are they to understand?</li> <li>• Are they appropriate to your needs?</li> <li>• Which is the best one? Why?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Which is worst? Why?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>For both best and worst:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does this make you feel about joining a PSR?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ How likely would you be to join a PSR after seeing this? Why?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• How could it be improved?</li> <li>• How does it make you feel about the company providing this?</li> </ul> <p><b>For all:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How would you want to receive this information? Why?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Would you want to receive any of these in a different way? Why?</li> <li>○ <b>IF APPLICABLE:</b> How could they take into account that Welsh is your first language?</li> <li>○ How often would you want to receive this information? How?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Do you think you would look for more information, or ask to be put on a register if you saw any of these? Why/why not?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Would it be helpful to have a friend or relative who could put you on the register?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Should all people who are eligible for the PSR be automatically put on it, or should people be given the choice to ask to be put on it themselves?</li> <li>• It is possible for energy suppliers and distributors to share your information about being registered to the PSR and the needs that you have so that you are automatically added to a register for anyone providing you with energy e.g. details being shared when you switch supplier or being given to your distribution company so that they can offer support if there is a power cut in your area automatically shared as oppose to you asking your energy companies individually to be put onto a register?</li> <li>• What are the advantages and disadvantages to being given a choice the first time you sign up to the PSR as to whether or not data is transferred automatically or you ask each energy company you deal with to be put on?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Should people be given this option?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Balancing services and costs</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Of the all of the services we've discussed (including new ones), which are 'must haves' or 'nice to haves'?</li> <li>• Given that providing these services might drive up costs for other users, which of these could be excluded to keep energy costs down and which should be protected at all costs?</li> </ul>   |

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| <p>One piece of advice</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• If you could give energy companies one piece of advice about communicating with and supporting those with particular needs, what would it be?<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ IF ONLY FINANCIAL: And if you could give them one piece of advice that isn't to do with financial help or helping people to reduce their energy use, what would it be?</li></ul></li></ul> |
|----------------------------|---|

## Non-Eligible Customers

### Discussion Guide:

| Section  | Discussion Guide   |
|--|--|
| <p>Introduction and circumstances</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to BritainThinks and moderator, and description of the project working in partnership with Ofgem</li> <li>• Check any individual needs are understood and accounted for so that everyone can participate fully in the group</li> <li>• Explain confidentiality and anonymity</li> <li>• Ask permission to record</li> <br/> <li>• Tell me a little about your life, your family, what you enjoy doing</li> <li>• How would you describe your lifestyle? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ How has this changed over time?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• What sort of obstacles do you encounter in your daily life?</li> <li>• Probe if appropriate: How does this make you feel?</li> <li>• Does anyone here speak Welsh as their first language? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Do you speak it over English in your day-to-day life?</li> <li>○ Does this present any barriers in your daily life?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• How well do you feel that you are coping?</li> <br/> <li>• Is there anything you feel you need extra help with?</li> <li>• Do you have friends or family that help you out? What do they do? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>BRING IN CARER/HELPER IF PRESENT AND WILLING TO PARTICIPATE:</b> Are there any other ways in which you help?</li> </ul> </li> <br/> <li>• What are the first three words that come to mind when you think about dealing with companies that provide you with water, gas and electricity?</li> <li>• How do you feel about dealing with them generally? (Other than cost) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Is there anything in particular that you struggle with when you deal with them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>IF APPLICABLE:</b> Does having Welsh as a first language present any issues?</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ How would you describe the way these companies deal with you? How far, if at all, do they help you overcome any difficulties you may have?</li> <li>○ Probe if appropriate: How does that make you feel?</li> <li>○ How does this compare with other companies or organisations you deal with, e.g. banks, the council, telephone / internet companies, etc?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>If carers/helpers present and willing to participate:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you help dealing with water, gas and electricity companies? If so, how?</li> </ul> |
| <p>Broad experiences and expectations of interactions with gas and electricity companies</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What sort of contact have you had with the companies that have been involved in providing your gas and electricity? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Has this been positive or negative? Why?</li> <li>○ How did they contact you/you contact them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>IF APPLICABLE:</b> Was this conducted in Welsh or English? How did this affect how positive the experience was?</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Did you get what you wanted to out of it?</li> <li>○ Was it how you expected it to be? What did you expect?</li> <li>○ How could it have been made better or easier for you?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>  |

|   |   |
|---|---|
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you had any other contact with your energy providers?</li> </ul> <p>(By contact we mean any sort of contact, either to or from your energy company. This could be via the phone, via letters between you or leaflets that they have you sent you through the post, face-to-face, via email or online in some other way.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you communicate with your energy company? How would you prefer to be contacted (phone, email, letter)</li> <li>• Do you mind being contacted regularly (aside from bills), or would you prefer to contact them yourself whenever you need to?</li> </ul> <p><b>PROBE ON:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Paying your bill</li> <li>○ Giving a meter reading</li> <li>○ Looking for information or advice because you have a question or query</li> <li>○ Conversations with sales people</li> <li>○ Making a complaint</li> <li>○ Switching supplier or tariff, or changing the way you pay</li> <li>○ Getting practical help with something e.g. having your meter moved so you can easily access it?</li> <li>○ Power cuts</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Service providers and other help received</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which gas and electricity companies are you aware of?</li> <li>• Are you aware of the difference between the companies that sell you your gas and electricity and those that distribute it to your area? What is the difference? How do you think this works? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Do you know the names of the companies that distribute gas and electricity to your area?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• What sort of help does <i>your</i> energy provider currently offer you?</li> <li>• What things do you think they should offer you? (probe on other than financial help)</li> <li>• Do you think that there any differences in the way that different gas and electricity companies deal with their customers? Do you know if any offer more help than others?</li> <li>• What kind of help might they offer? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Probe on...</li> <li>○ finding the best tariff for you, or helping you to reduce the amount of energy you use.</li> <li>○ any help that isn't about saving you money or helping you to reduce your energy use</li> </ul> </li> <li>•</li> </ul>               |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Upfront experience and views of PSRs</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What sorts of free services have you heard of energy companies offering people with particular needs e.g. older people or those who are disabled?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>IF ONLY FINANCIAL:</b> Have you heard of any free services that aren't to do with saving you money or helping you reduce your energy use?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Probe fully for spontaneous awareness before exploring prompted awareness: Energy companies are required to maintain registers of customers with particular needs and offer special services to those customers based on their needs. These are often called Priority Service Registers, but can also be schemes known as Carefree, Careline or Warm Response. People of pensionable age, people who have a disability or have a long-term illness are currently the only people that qualify to go on the register. Being on the registers for these schemes may entitle you to services such as such as having your bill sent to a family member or friend, help reading your meter, or a doorstep password scheme.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has anyone heard of anything like this?</li> <li>• What have you heard/seen?</li> <li>• Where did you hear/see this? Are you surprised to hear that energy companies offer these sorts of services? Why/why not?</li> <li>• What sorts of services would you expect to be offered by these schemes?</li> <li>• What kinds of people would you expect to be covered by this type of scheme?</li> </ul> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Do you know any particular names for these services?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Has any one heard of any of these (Priority Service Register, Carefree, Careline, Warm Response)</li> <li>▪ Are any of these names better than others? Why? What do they mean to you?</li> <li>▪ Do any make more sense as a name for these kinds of services than others?</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is this something you would be interested in finding out more about? Why/why not?</li> <li>• Has anyone contacted their energy company themselves or through a friend or family member to discuss how they can help with any non-financial difficulties they've had?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Why/why not?</li> <li>○ If yes, what response did you get?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>REFERRING BACK TO NEEDS DISCUSSED EARLIER:</b> What sorts of services could your energy company offer to help you personally? How could they do things differently to help you personally?</p> <p><b>IF ONLY FINANCIAL:</b> Could they offer any services that aren't to do with saving you money or helping you to reduce your energy usage?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What about in terms of:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The way companies communicate with you?                 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How they keep you informed of important and urgent information (e.g. upcoming power cuts)</li> <li>▪ <b>IF APPLICABLE:</b> How they take into account Welsh being your first language?</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ How they help you to stay safe or not put yourself at risk?</li> <li>○ The way they tailor services for you?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
|--|--|

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>Views on current services offered on PSRs</b></p> | <p>Here is a list of the types of services energy companies currently offer to customers on their Priority Service Registers. Some of these are services all energy companies have to offer, others are additional services some companies offer voluntarily.</p> <p><b>MODERATOR DISPLAYS AND READS OUT LIST OF EXAMPLES OF MANDATORY AND ADDITIONAL SERVICES OFFERED ON PSRs AND FREE GAS SAFETY CHECKS ONE AT A TIME</b></p> <p><b>Going through each:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Would this be useful to you? Why/why not?</li> <li>• [Referring back to difficulties raised at the beginning of the group, where relevant] Earlier you said you found xx challenging, how would this service make a difference to you?</li> <li>• Is this an important service? Why?</li> <li>• Would it be particularly important for other groups of people?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Which other types of people? Why?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>Considering all of them together:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which of these are the most important to you? Why?</li> <li>• Which of these are the least important to you? Why?</li> <li>• Are there any that are mandatory that shouldn't be? Why?</li> <li>• Are there any additional ones that should be mandatory? Why?</li> <li>• Have any of these surprised you? Why/why not?</li> <li>• Which of these would you <i>expect</i> an energy company to do? Which wouldn't you?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Is there anything you would expect them to offer that we haven't covered?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Earlier we mentioned that there are different types of companies in the industry. Do you think that some of these should be offered by one and not the other? Why do you say that?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there any you would expect to be offered by a distributor and not a supplier, or vice versa?</li> <li>• Thinking about the challenges we talked about earlier, what other services could energy providers offer that would personally make your life easier?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>IF ONLY FINANCIAL:</b> Could they offer any services that aren't to do with saving you money or helping you to reduce your energy use?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• If your gas or electricity provider offered these services to you, how would it change the way you feel about them?</li> <li>• Thinking about all of the services you've heard about being offered on PSRs, how helpful would it be if you were offered the chance to register for a PSR? Would make a difference to you? Why?</li> </ul> <p>It could be possible for energy suppliers and distributors to share your information about being registered to the PSR and the needs that you have so that you are automatically added to a register for anyone providing you with energy e.g. details being shared when you switch supplier or being given to your distribution company so that they can offer support, for example if there is a power cut in your area</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you feel about this data being automatically shared as opposed to you asking your energy companies individually to be put onto a register?</li> <li>• What choices should you be given the first time you sign up to the PSR?</li> <li>• If you switched energy supplier would you want to be automatically</li> </ul> |
|---|--|

|   |   |
|---|---|
|   | <p>transferred to the new supplier's PSR?</p>   |
| <p><b>Views on eligibility criteria</b></p> | <p>Here are some lists of customers who are currently eligible to be on PSRs and receive the sorts of services we have just talked about</p> <p><b>MODERATOR DISPLAYS AND READS OUT LIST OF PSR ELIGIBLE CUSTOMER GROUPS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you feel about PSRs being offered to these groups? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Do all of these groups need this kind of support?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• How do these eligibility criteria make you feel about PSRs? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ How do they make you feel about the companies that offer them?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Here are some groups who are currently not eligible for support, but who could potentially benefit from some kind of support:</p> <p><b>MODERATOR DISPLAYS AND READS OUT LIST OF NON-PSR ELIGIBLE CUSTOMER GROUPS, INCLUDING WELSH AS A FIRST LANGUAGE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you feel about additional services being offered to these groups? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Do all of these groups need the services offered on PSRs, or any of the additional ones we have identified might be useful? Are some of these more important than others? Why?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Would including these change the way you feel about PSRs or the companies that hold them?</li> </ul> <p><b>Looking at all of them together</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there any important groups that have been missed? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Why is it important that they are included?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Balancing services and costs</b></p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Of the all of the services we've discussed (including new ones), which are 'must haves' or 'nice to haves'?</li> <li>• Given that providing these services might drive up costs for other users, which of these could be excluded to keep energy costs down and which should be protected at all costs?</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>One piece of advice</b></p>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you could give energy companies one piece of advice about supporting those with particular needs, what would it be? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ IF ONLY FINANCIAL: And if you could give them one piece of advice that isn't to do with financial help or helping people to reduce their energy use, what would it be?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>  |

## Customers on a PSR - depth interviews (in-home)

### Discussion Guide

| Section  | Discussion Guide  |
|--|---|
| <p>Introduction and circumstances</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to BritainThinks and moderator, and description of the project working in partnership with Ofgem</li> <li>• Check any individual needs are understood and accounted for so that interviewee can participate fully in the interview</li> <li>• Explain confidentiality and anonymity</li> <li>• Ask permission to record</li> <br/> <li>• Tell me a little about your life, your family, what you enjoy doing</li> <li>• How would you describe your lifestyle? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ How has this changed over time?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• What sort of obstacles do you encounter in your daily life?</li> <li>• Probe if appropriate: How does this make you feel?</li> <li>• Is Welsh your first language? Do you speak it over English in your day-to-day life? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Does this present any barriers in your daily life?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• How well do you feel that you are coping?</li> <br/> <li>• Is there anything you feel you need extra help with?</li> <li>• Do you have friends or family that help you out? What do they do? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>BRING IN CARER/HELPER IF PRESENT (and willing to participate):</b> Are there any other ways in which you help?</li> </ul> </li> <br/> <li>• How do you feel about dealing with companies that provide you with water, gas and electricity? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Is there anything in particular that you struggle with when you deal with them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>IF APPLICABLE:</b> Does having Welsh as a first language present any issues?</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ How would you describe the way these companies deal with you? How far, if at all, do they help you overcome any difficulties you may have?</li> <li>○ Probe if appropriate: How does that make you feel?</li> <li>○ How does this compare with other companies or organisations you deal with, e.g. banks, the council, telephone / internet companies, etc?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>If carer/helper present and willing to participate:</b><br/>Do you help XXXX deal with water, gas and electricity companies? If so, how?</p> <p>Are you registered with any of the companies to deal with XXXX's accounts for any of these companies (e.g. you might receive correspondence on their behalf and deal with bills)?</p> |
| <p>Broad experiences and expectations of interactions with gas and electricity</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What sort of contact have you had with the companies that provide your gas and electricity? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Has this been positive or negative? Why?</li> <li>○ How did they contact you/you contact them?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>   |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>companies</b></p>                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>IF APPLICABLE:</b> Was this conducted in Welsh or English? How did this affect how positive the experience was?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Did you get what you wanted to out of it?</li> <li>○ Was it how you expected it to be? What did you expect?</li> <li>○ How could it have been made better or easier for you?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Have you had any other contact with your energy providers?</li> </ul> <p>(By contact we mean any sort of contact, either to or from your energy company. This could be via the phone, via letters between you or leaflets that they have you sent you through the post, face-to-face, via email or online in some other way.)</p> <p>PROBE ON:</p> <p>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Paying your bill</li> <li>○ Providing a meter reading</li> <li>○ Looking for information or advice because you have a question or query</li> <li>○ Conversations with sales people</li> <li>○ Making a complaint</li> <li>○ Switching supplier or tariff, or changing the way you pay</li> <li>○ Getting practical help with something?</li> <li>○ Power cuts</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Service providers and other help received</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which gas and electricity companies are you aware of?</li> <li>• Are you aware of the difference between the companies that sell you your gas and electricity and those that distribute it to your area? What is the difference? How do you think this works?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Do you know the names of the companies that distribute gas and electricity to your area?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• What sort of help does <i>your</i> energy provider currently offer you? (e.g. support services / non-financial help)</li> <li>• What things do you think they should offer you?</li> <li>• Do you think that there any differences in the way that different gas and electricity companies deal with their customers? Do you know if any offer more help than others?</li> <li>• What kind of help might they offer?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Probe on...</li> <li>○ Finding the best tariff for you, or helping you to reduce the amount of energy you use.</li> <li>○ Any help that isn't about saving you money or helping you to reduce your energy use</li> </ul> </li> </ul>         |
| <p><b>PSR experience</b></p>                            | <p>I understand you are on a Priority Service Register/Careline/Carefree/Warm Response (explain and say for which supplier/distributor)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Were you aware that you were on this register?</li> <li>• Do you know what the register is for?</li> <li>• Thinking about the register you're on, what sorts of services do you think being on these registers might entitle you to?</li> </ul>   |

- What sort of help, if any, do you receive from this company/did you receive in the past?
- How do you feel about the services that the company offers you?
  - Have you used any of the services that were offered to you?
  - What difference does having these services make to your life?
  - Are they the right services for you?
  - Was there anything surprising?
  - What would it be like if you didn't have these services?

**INTERVIEWER TO PROBE ON AVAILABLE SERVICES NOT MENTIONED (I.E. ALL AVAILABLE SERVICES THEY ARE ELIGIBLE FOR BUT HAVE NOT MENTIONED)**

- Were you aware this service was offered?
- Would it be useful to you? Why/why not?
- What has stopped you from taking up the offer of this service?
  - What could the company do differently to overcome these barriers?
- Thinking about all of these services together, are there any others that you would have expected?
- Is there anything else that you need or that would be useful?
- How do you communicate with your energy company? How would you prefer to be contacted (phone, email, letter)
- Do you mind being contacted regularly (aside from bills), or would you prefer to contact them yourself whenever you need to?

**Referring back to any previous contact / problems with energy companies mentioned and probe where relevant:**

- What about in terms of:
  - The way companies communicate with you?
    - How they keep you informed of important and urgent information (e.g. upcoming power cuts)
    - **IF APPLICABLE:** How they take into account Welsh being your first language?
  - How they help you to stay safe or not put yourself at risk?
  - The way they tailor services for you?

**Talk me through the process of registering (ASK QUESTIONS TO CARER IF APPLICABLE)**

- How did you hear about the register /services offered?
- How did you register for the service with this company?
  - Did anyone else help you? Did you actively seek this information out or did you get sent something / did someone (for example a friend, family member, charity, other organisation) tell you about it?
  - How did you / your carer contact your supplier/distributor?
  - What were you asked/told by the company?
  - What information were you given? And what information have you received since you signed up?
  - Was this appropriate to your needs?

|   |   |
|---|---|
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What happened after the initial contact?</li> <li>○ How did you feel about it?</li> <li>○ Ask to see any communications if they have it / are willing to share</li> <li>● Was it easy to understand the process?</li> <li>● What about the people you dealt with, were they understanding? What about the service they provided to you?</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>Potential PSR services and data sharing</b></p> | <p><b>INTERVIEWER READS OUT A LIST OF POTENTIAL NEW PSR SERVICES</b></p> <p><b>For each:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Would this be useful to you? Why/Why not?</li> <li>● How could it be improved to be better suited to you?</li> <li>● Would you expect any different services from other energy companies?</li> </ul> <p>It could be possible for energy suppliers and distributors to share your information about being registered to the PSR and the needs that you have so that you are automatically added to a register for anyone providing you with energy e.g. details being shared when you switch supplier or being given to your distribution company so that they can offer support, for example if there is a power cut in your area</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How do you feel about this data being automatically shared as opposed to you asking your energy companies individually to be put onto a register?</li> <li>● What choices should you be given the first time you sign up to the PSR?</li> <li>● If you switched energy supplier would you want to be automatically transferred to the new supplier's PSR?</li> </ul>                         |
| <p><b>Emotional response</b></p>                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How has being on a PSR made you feel about your gas and electricity providers? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Probe - personal, impersonal, they understand/don't understand my needs</li> <li>○ How does it make you feel about how the way they provide their services to you?</li> <li>○ Have either of these changed at all during the process? Why?</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Is there anything else they could do to help you?</li> <li>● How do you feel about contacting your energy company to request this?</li> <li>● Do you think that there are other types of people could benefit from these types of services? Who?</li> <li>● What would you say to energy companies about how else they might help people? Probe on non financial services</li> </ul> <p>Different companies use different names for this - some call them a Priority Service Register, Careline, Carefree or Warm Response.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What are positive/negative about these names? Do they make you feel more or less positive about signing up to them? Why?</li> <li>● How do you feel about the companies having their own names</li> </ul> |

|   |  |
|---|--|
|   | <p>for the registers, rather than all calling it the same? What do you think it should be?</p>   |
| <p><b>Observation - energy use and needs around the house</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk me through how you use energy in your house (if possible, respondent to show moderator round the house)</li> <li>• Moderator to probe based on previous conversation about services received through the PSR and how these make a difference and what other help would be appropriate and/or of value</li> <li>• What advice would you give to energy companies having had this conversation?</li> </ul> |