

RURAL VULNERABILITY RESEARCH PROJECT (2020/21)

Outline proposal by Rural England CIC

Context and purpose

The utilities sector has made considerable progress to support its most vulnerable customers, especially where they are (temporarily) left without electricity, gas or water due to a fault at the home or in the supply network. Vulnerable customers can sign up to their utility supplier's or network operator's Priority Services Register (PSR), giving them access to extra help and support. Eligibility criteria for the PSR include older age, disability, long term medical conditions and hearing or visual impairment. Each utility company maintains its own PSR, though efforts have been made to share information (compliant with GDPR) so that PSR lists are more complete and customers do not need to sign up multiple times.

It is recognised that rural circumstances can impact on the experience of vulnerability. For example, physical isolation may be a particular issue for some rural customers. Similarly, the rural housing stock is typically older and larger than its urban comparator, meaning some homes will be harder to heat. There may also be challenges getting information out to those who live in outlying rural settlements, not least about the PSR itself.

There may be future issues, too, for vulnerable rural households, as a consequence of policy and related technology developments which seek to take the UK further towards its statutory target of becoming a net zero (for greenhouse gas emissions) country by 2050.

Given this context, six utility companies – Cadent Gas, Calor Gas, Green Energy, Southern Water, Wales & West Utilities and Western Power Distribution – have come together to commission research that explores the rural dimension to vulnerability, as experienced by some of their customers. They have formed a Rural Vulnerability Research Panel, which plans to oversee a three year research programme. This project brief outlines the proposal for the first year (2020/21).

Objectives

The overall aim of this research project is to understand better the lived experience of a range of vulnerable customers who live in rural areas. Indeed, how important rurality is as a factor. This will be used to consider whether more or better designed PSR support could be provided. Specific objectives for the project are as follows:

- To identify the most common issues that are faced by vulnerable rural customers and the practical implications from these;
- To explore whether those issues vary in any consistent way between different types of vulnerable rural customers;
- To explore how far those common issues for vulnerable rural customers are rural-specific or (at least) experienced differently from an urban context;

- To understand how those who provide care to vulnerable rural customers perceive these vulnerability issues and its rural experience;
- To explore whether the issues and experiences of vulnerable customers vary across different types of rural area;
- To see whether the rural vulnerability issues identified have any differing implications for electricity, gas and water companies;
- To identify from the findings any lessons for the utility companies or their partner organisations, including potential gaps in the PSR support currently provided; and
- To consider whether particular issues are likely to arise for vulnerable rural customers from the push to introduce smart metering and low carbon technologies.

Research approach

Whilst it is accepted that not all vulnerable people will be in households signed up to the PSR, for practical reasons this project will conduct fieldwork with those on the PSR. The register provides a means of reaching relevant people and it gives some consistency to those covered by the research.

The project will seek to use the official (Office for National Statistics) definition of ‘rural’, which is all settlements with a population of less than 10,000. This covers small towns, villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings or farms. It is, however, recognised that vulnerability experiences may differ between (say) hamlets and small towns.

The research will seek to cover different types of rural area, as well as different settlement size. It would, for example, be interesting to carry out fieldwork in a coastal area, an upland area and a more accessible rural area (near to an urban centre).

At the core of the research methodology will be a series of workshops with vulnerable rural customers and some interviews with their carers. This will offer the ‘deep dive’ approach seen as necessary to understand how vulnerability is experienced and its practical implications.

The methodology will include the following components:

Project initiation: scope out in detail the project activities and timeline, and clarify or agree any points of definition or understanding (if necessary with the commissioning organisations). It would also be helpful to give some early thought to the main target audiences for the project report. This stage will ensure a well-run and properly focused project. [2 days]

Evidence review: search for, collate and review evidence which provides a sound contextual base for the project, about rural vulnerability and about PSR customers more generally. It is understood that the commissioning organisations have various reports and evidential material which they are willing to share. This secondary research stage will generate material for an introductory section to the report and it can be drawn upon when developing findings from the next two stages. The evidence should include some quantitative material (statistics) to complement the more qualitative primary research described below. [4 days]

Workshops with vulnerable rural customers: workshops will be arranged and facilitated at four (tbc) locations which represent different rural geographies across England¹. Working with the commissioning organisations (see below), a cross-section of PSR customers who live in those locations will be invited to attend. Venues will need to be sourced. Vulnerability experiences will be explored with the willing participants, focusing on issues of particular relevance to utility supply, utility contracts and PSR support. Issues concerning the path to a lower carbon / more fuel efficient future will also be explored. Facilitating these workshops to get the most from them will need a fair amount of preparation.

For understandable GDPR reasons, it is assumed the research project team will not have access to information about individuals on the PSR. Utility companies will therefore need to identify PSR customers living in rural areas and ask a cross-section of them from the selected locations if they are willing to take part in workshops. There is a list of rural postcodes, which should enable this process. A record and notes will be kept from these workshops, which can be fully analysed to generate material for the report. [12 days]

Interviews with carers: a series of interviews will be conducted with people who provide care to vulnerable rural customers. They will explore carer perspectives on the vulnerability experiences of those they care for. Ideally these will be from the same locations as the workshops, though this may be hard to achieve in practice. A key practical step is deciding how carers will be recruited for interview i.e. how to identify and contact them. Options include asking PSR customers, asking Parish Councils and even going directly to care providers. Some of the interviewed should be paid care professionals and some unpaid carers (most likely family members). Care professionals may (each) be able to reflect on various vulnerable rural customers they support. It may be necessary to pay these professionals for an hour of their time, if they work on contracts paying them per care visit. These interviews should add a different perspective to the workshop findings. Again, a full set of notes will be kept which can be analysed for the report. [3 days]

Illustrative case studies: those who attend the workshops and who are interviewed will be asked whether they are willing to have their 'story' used as a short case study. As far as possible these will be drawn from across the research locations, though ultimately that will be determined by who agrees to be subject of a case study. They are likely to require some follow up to the workshops / interviews to check facts. These will be written up in a suitably anonymised form. A number of case studies will then appear through the project report, illustrating the vulnerability experience of some individuals and highlighting any rural-specific issues. They should help bring the issues in the report to life and add to its readability. [3 days]

Report writing: material from the evidence review, PSR customer workshops, carer interviews and case studies will be analysed, sorted and written up in a full project report. This will be structured to emphasise the main research findings and will draw out lessons. It will do this in a way which relates back to the research objectives. It will include some tables and graphics to break up the text. As noted above, it will also include some case studies. The report will have a summary at the front for readers just wishing to dip into the key messages. A full draft of the report will be shared

¹ It may be desirable to include workshop locations served by Southern Water, Wales & West Utilities and Western Power Distribution.

with the Rural Vulnerability Research Panel for their review and comments. Revisions will then be made, as appropriate.

No personal information which could identify individuals interviewed or attending workshops will appear in the report. Preserving their anonymity will be crucial and all such information will be treated in a manner which is fully compliant with GDPR terms. The subjects of any case studies will be given the opportunity to review and agree them. [6 days]

Dissemination

Rural England CIC and its associates would be pleased to help publish and disseminate the report and its summary. This will be for decision with the Rural Vulnerability Research Panel. Either way, the assistance of and funding from these commissioning bodies will be fully acknowledged.

The findings should be of interest to a range of audiences, including utility networks operators, energy suppliers, sector bodies and regulators, rural interest groups, politicians (at both national and local levels) and, indeed, rural communities themselves. We have access to a significant number of networks, contacts and dissemination channels which could be leveraged.

Project management

The project will be delivered by experienced Rural England CIC research associates and discussions are underway to confirm the team. It will be overseen by a Rural England Director who will monitor progress, work with the team to resolve any delivery issues and review / sign off on project outputs.

The project will be delivered to the Rural Vulnerability Research Panel. They will meet (either face-to-face or virtually, as appropriate) at intervals to monitor project progress and provide a steer. They will receive a full draft of the project report for review and comment prior to it being revised and finalised.

Timescale

The project will commence as soon as possible once the brief has been agreed. In practical terms this seem likely to mean a May 2020 start. The target would then be to produce a draft version of the report by November 2020 and to an agreed final version by January 2021. A more detailed timeline can be included in the brief when Rural England CIC associates are confirmed.

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