



Experiences and Issues for Rural Energy and Water Customers

in Priority Services Register Code Groups

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Focus of the study

This project aims to explore in more detail the experiences of people living in rural areas who may be on the Priority Services Register and are particularly vulnerable to energy or water supply disruptions. Specifically, this research aims to understand in greater depth the situation of people in the following groups:

- People with mental health and/or dementia
- People who are dependent on medical equipment, e.g. stair lift, ventilator, dialysis pump, oxygen concentrator, apnoea monitor
- People who are blind or partially sighted

Objectives of the study

To build upon previous research and provide an evidence base to enable utility providers to enhance their PSR support, the objectives of this research are:

- Understand how rural-based customers eligible for the PSR within the specified groups, rely on and experience electricity, gas and water;
- Explore how those customers have been or could be impacted if there is a planned or unplanned supply outage of electricity, gas or water at their property;
- Consider how far existing PSR support is likely to address or mitigate those impacts and whether that support could be developed to better meet their needs;
- Identify what organisations or groups people with specific needs tend to turn to for help or advice, who might be useful partners to promote PSR take-up.

Research Design



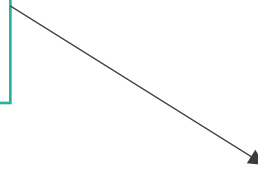
Desk-based analysis of existing evidence



Analysis of primary and secondary data



Draft Report



11 interviews were undertaken with representatives from **10 national and local organisations** that represented the interests of the target PSR codes

20 interviews were undertaken with people from the PSR code groups via telephone or videocall, with an additional **focus group of six participants** and **one written survey**



Background Analysis

Blind and Partially Sighted

- Likely proportionally higher numbers of people with visual impairments in rural areas
- People living in rural areas face unique challenges in accessing support and services due to geographical limitations and transportation issues

Mental Health and/or Dementia

- Lack of mental health or dementia services, impacted by poor transport links and digital connectivity
- Remoteness of some rural locations can lead to social isolation
- Stigma an issue
- Rates of dementia likely higher in rural areas
- Create additional demands on utility use

Medical Equipment

- Include stairlifts, ventilators, dialysis machines, oxygen concentrators, or positive airway pressure machines
- Likely to increase with rising age profile

Findings One

Understanding how rural-based customers within the target PSR groups rely on electricity, gas or water and how they are impacted by planned or unplanned supply outage.

Blind or partially sighted



- **Lack of light** is a major issue for those who are partially sighted

- **Access to the internet** a vital channel to support services



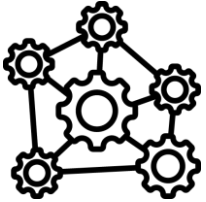
- People with visual impairments unable to see **dirty water** during disruption



- **Maintenance** in an area can disrupt walking routes



Medical Equipment



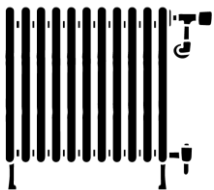
- People with **multiple or complex needs** could be the hardest hit in the event of a stoppage to any utility

- Stoppage to **electricity** was the biggest concern for participants

- **Ability to communicate** during an electricity outage also a worry, especially in areas with poor mobile phone connectivity.

- Stoppages to **heat sources (electricity or gas)** can be detrimental for people with certain conditions

- **Running water** is required for washing and cleaning due to issues such as incontinence as well as showering for skin conditions



Mental Health and/or Dementia

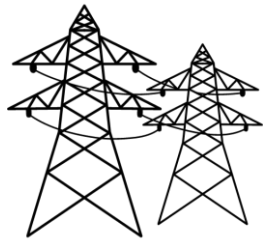


- There is **increased electricity, gas, and water use** for households registered under this priority code due to heating and cleaning

- Disruptions to utilities can **break people's routines**



- **Stoppages to electricity can impact the water supply** of people rural areas



Findings Two

How far existing PSR support addresses or mitigates the identified issues and whether that support could be developed to better meet the needs of the target groups



Communication of PSR

Accessibility

'I found out about it at an event, and I was given some leaflets, and they had a dark blue background and white text, and I couldn't read them. I took them home and I put them in a drawer and I forgot about them because I couldn't read them.'

Promotion of PSR

*'Actually, **companies have given us fridge magnets** to put on the fridge where you've got the number there. You haven't got to think about it. You just got a number straightaway.'*

Communication and support during a stoppage or outage

'I wouldn't say it's something that I feel I could rely on and feel reassured by. It's quite the opposite.'



Rurality and PSR

Rural: difficulties, resilience, isolation, and social connections

Telephones and digital phones

Rural transport

Poverty of expectation in rural areas

*'I think we're probably **more prone to outages**. Being in a rural community. That's just my perception. Obviously, we do have the issues of the electric in the winter'.*

*'BT trying to switch the telephone system to broadband-based, instead of landline-based. However, **when the power goes out, the broadband goes down**. It makes it a lot more difficult [for] people to contact anyone.'*

*'To go to the doctor's surgery, **I need to get five buses** and that doesn't always add up to the time your appointment is. If they're running late then you're stuck coming back.*

'I feel in a similar situation, they do have a lot more arrangements in urban areas.



Structural and Practical

A collaborative and coherent approach to PSR provision

Bills, finance, and fuel poverty

Storage batteries for medical devices

*'it's on the individual to approach each utility ... It's just a **shame there wasn't more cohesion and transparency** amongst those sorts of organisations.'*

*'our **heating bill went from about £110 a week to £195**. When we realised it was the underfloor heating we obviously switched it off, but it gets very cold in that room. My daughter's wet room can also get very cold in the winter. So yeah, **we do struggle***

*'if they were able to provide **funding for the machine that did have a backup**, that would be a solution.'*

Organisations and Groups

35 organisations and groups identified who those in the target groups turn to for support. These were a mixture of local, regional and national.

Recommendations

Study Recommendations

1. Seek opportunities to actively listen to people on the priority services register
2. Increase collaboration between utilities and with statutory and non-statutory organisations to enhance the support offered to customers on the PSR
3. Work with the government and BT (Openreach) to ensure rural customers are supported during the completion of digitalisation of the telephone network
4. Utility network operators should strive to make communications as accessible as possible
5. Explore the provision of backup batteries to high-risk customers with medical devices in rural areas
6. Automatic enrolment for those most at risk of disruptions to their utilities, with an opt out
7. Provide further support when flushing water through the system
8. Run a targeted promotional campaign about the PSR, its existence and what it does
9. Ensure support provisions are in place for people with specific water needs