

## **WALES & WEST UTILITIES**

# **BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE: SUPPORTING CUSTOMERS MOST IN NEED**

## **FEEDBACK REPORT**

**JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2021**



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## CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>ATTENDEES .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>SESSION ONE: BUSINESS PLAN UPDATE .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>SESSION TWO: SUPPORTING CUSTOMERS MOST IN NEED .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>SESSION THREE: CARBON MONOXIDE AWARENESS – A TARGETED APPROACH .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>APPENDIX 1: WORKSHOP FEEDBACK.....</b>	<b>28</b>

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## INTRODUCTION

On 21 January and 22 February 2021, Wales & West Utilities hosted two online workshops aimed at eliciting feedback from stakeholders in its South West and South Wales licence areas, respectively. Both workshops followed the same format and focused on topic of: **Supporting Customers Most in Need**. Owing to the circumstances regarding Covid-19, the workshops were hosted virtually using the Zoom platform, rather than in person.

Participants in the workshops came from a range of backgrounds, including the local authority, housing and vulnerability service sectors. Representatives from parish / community councils, businesses and emergency services were also in attendance.

The workshops comprised a series of presentations given by senior Wales & West personnel followed by discussion sessions in breakout rooms. The workshops were split into three sessions, which are shown below:

- Session One: Business Plan Update
- Session Two: Supporting Customers Most in Need
- Session Three: Carbon Monoxide Awareness – A Targeted Approach

Wales & West Utilities instructed EQ Communications, a specialist stakeholder engagement consultancy, to independently facilitate the workshops and to take notes of the comments made by stakeholders. Comments have not been attributed to individuals to ensure that all stakeholders were able to speak as candidly as possible.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each workshop session opened with a presentation by a senior member of personnel from Wales & West utilities, followed by a discussion session. This report contains summaries of the findings from the discussion sessions, as well as verbatim comments and written feedback submitted by stakeholders.

### SESSION ONE: BUSINESS PLAN UPDATE

Most attendees in the South West were local authority officers (25%), vulnerability service providers (21%) or housing association representatives (21%). Other groups in attendance included parish / community councillors and business representatives. In Wales, the majority of stakeholders were vulnerability service providers (44%) or housing association representatives (19%), while other types of stakeholder groups in attendance were emergency service providers, businesses or local authorities.

At both workshops, stakeholders discussed the impact of Covid-19 on fuel poverty and vulnerability. In the South West, it was noted that, owing to the reduction in home visits, outreach workers had been unable to ascertain the living conditions of at-risk groups and, of the home visits that had been conducted, vulnerability service providers had noted a stark increase in deprivation, with some homes even unfit for gas installation.

In Wales, it was commented that Covid-19 had led to a marked rise in fuel poverty with an increase in the number of people who had never previously asked for support now finding themselves struggling to get by. As a result, Covid-19 had pushed people in fuel poverty into more severe poverty, while the 'just about managing' demographic – including working people with non-negotiable financial obligations – had found themselves experiencing fuel poverty for the first time.

### SESSION TWO: SUPPORTING CUSTOMERS MOST IN NEED

Stakeholders were asked to vote on whether they thought Wales & West Utilities' proposed level of spend for the Business Plan was about right, or whether they could be more ambitious in particular areas. At both events, the highest rated area was 'fuel poverty / energy efficiency', with stakeholders voting that Wales & West Utilities should invest more heavily than proposed in this area. 'Education' also ranked highly, with participants feeling that the company could enhance its engagement with primary and secondary schools and provide customers with valuable life skills, such as in reading bills and budgeting. Other areas that generated thoughtful discussion included 'support for customer broken appliances' and 'co awareness'.

In terms of the existing barriers to alleviating fuel poverty and promoting energy efficiency, stakeholders noted that some properties had existing issues which meant that energy efficiency improvements barely scratched the surface. Moreover, it was felt that some customer groups are naturally more difficult to target – including the elderly and those on low incomes who do not meet eligibility

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requirements for assistance. As a potential solution, it was suggested that Wales & West Utilities could partner with smaller organisations that have experience stretching small budgets and already have a trusted link to the community.

As for how Wales & West Utilities could promote the Priority Service Register (PSR), it was felt that it could make use of existing organisations such as parish councils, charity shops, social landlords and community groups. Importantly, stakeholders called for a region-specific approach, given that the scope of influence each organisation has varies between regions, so a one-size-fits-all approach would not be appropriate. In terms of the type of messaging to adopt, it was felt that basic awareness of the PSR is quite low, so Wales & West Utilities needs to explain what the register is and how it can benefit people through clear and concise messaging.

### **SESSION THREE: CARBON MONOXIDE – A TARGETED APPROACH**

In terms of which organisations Wales & West Utilities should partner with to raise awareness of carbon monoxide, stakeholders had a range of suggestions, including schools, charities with a focus on a particular demographic (e.g., Age Concern), landlord forums and council networks. Social media platforms were seen as a good way of reaching younger customers, while it was suggested that supermarkets and GP surgeries could display physical signs or information leaflets to engage with the elderly or less digitally engaged. Other suggestions included increasing Wales & West Utilities visibility during events, such as Freshers Fairs or Gas Safety Week. Harder-to-reach demographics, which would require more creative thinking from Wales & West Utilities in terms of outreach, included families and tenants in private rented accommodation.

As for the form this messaging should take, stakeholders suggested that a simple ‘signs to look out for’ campaign could be effective. To reach the less digitally engaged, it was felt that Wales & West Utilities could consider more innovative physical media like postcards rather than leaflets, which people tend to throw away straight away. For the younger generation, it was felt that social media platforms such as Instagram or TikTok could be an effective medium for catchy information campaigns. This split in approach was seen as crucial to reaching every demographic – with the suggestion made that Wales & West Utilities could perhaps invest more in profiling its customers to better target information campaigns on carbon monoxide.

### **WRITTEN FEEDBACK**

After the workshop, stakeholders were asked to complete a short feedback form. Some of the key findings are shown below. A full breakdown of the feedback can be found in Appendix 1 of this report.

- 96% of attendees who filled out a feedback form told us that they found the workshop either ‘very interesting’ or ‘interesting’.
- 70% ‘strongly agreed’ that they had had an opportunity to make points and ask questions, while 27% ‘agreed’.

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- 87% 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the right topics were discussed on the day.
  - 100% thought EQ Communications' facilitation was either 'very good' or 'good'.
  - 100% felt the online format worked 'well' or 'very well'.

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## ATTENDEES

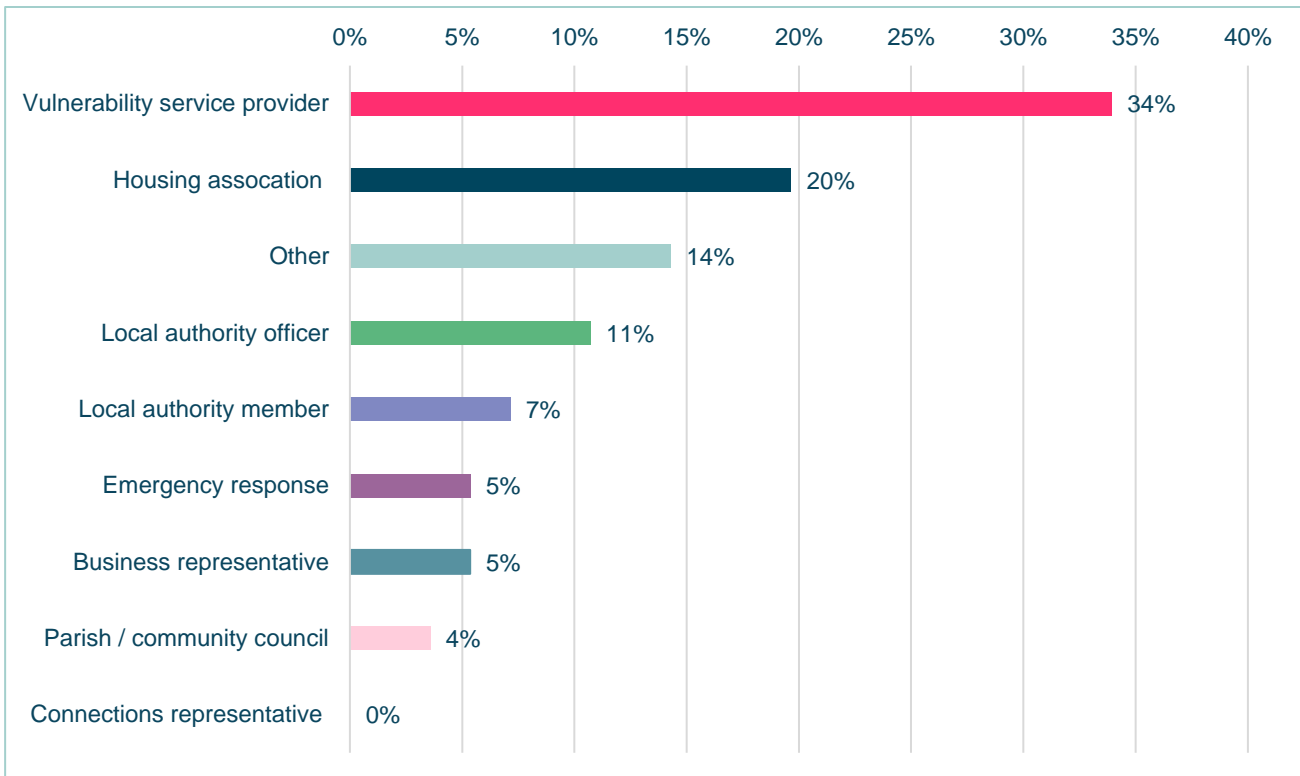
A total of 29 stakeholders from 21 organisations attended the South West regional workshop on 21 January. The organisations are listed below.

Abri Group	North Somerset Council
AgilityEco	Penzance Town Council
BCHA	Sovereign Housing Association
Care and Repair	St Cuthbert (Out) Parish Council
Citizens Advice	Street Parish Council
Curo	Teignbridge District Council
East Devon District Council	The Heat Project
LiveWest	Wadebridge Town Council
Mendip District Council	WDBC
MHA Communities Swindon	Wychavon DC
NHS Gloucestershire CCG	

A total of 36 attendees from 28 organisations attended the Wales regional workshop on 22 February. The organisations are listed below.

Afallen	Cornwall Housing Ltd
Age Cymru	Dangerpoint Ltd
Barcud	Energy Saving Trust
Bristol City Council	Exeter Community Energy
Bron Afon Community Housing	Hafod
Care & Repair	Hope4U
Care & Repair in Powys	NEA Cymru
Care & Repair North East Wales	South Wales Fire and Rescue Service
Care and Repair Western Bay	SP Energy Networks
Carmarthenshire Citizens Advice	Tai Tarian
Ceredigion Citizens Advice	Torfaen County Borough Council
CLA Cymru	Warm Wales
Coastal Housing	Welsh Government
Conwy County Borough Council	West Wales Care and Repair

The split of attendees by stakeholder type is shown below, as an average across both events.





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## SESSION ONE: BUSINESS PLAN UPDATE

The first presentation of the day was given by Sarah Hopkins, People and Engagement Director. Sarah explained how Wales & West Utilities supplies gas to 2.5 million homes and businesses, serving a population of 7.5 million people across Wales and South West England. During the Covid-19 pandemic, keeping customers and communities safe and warm had remained a firm priority, and the company was proud to have maintained its momentum and high standards.

Looking ahead, Sarah discussed the company's next Business Plan – the company's most sustainable plan ever – which has been informed by the views of over 21,000 stakeholders. In light of the pandemic, however, the company was keen to hear from stakeholders to see whether any priorities may have changed, particularly in relation to supporting customers most in need, ahead of the start of the next five-year Business Plan cycle in April 2021.

### REASONS FOR ATTENDING

Stakeholders in the South West came with a broad range of interests. Many were involved in gas safety, such as through running school education campaigns or implementing risk reduction programmes in domestic properties. There was a high turnout of service providers who support customers in vulnerable situations, with one delegate noting that, through their involvement in healthy homes checks, they had seen an increasing number of properties that were severely rundown and off the gas mains, while more and more people not usually classed as vulnerable had been coming forward for help. Housing associations, for their part, were keen to hear what the smart transition would mean for their tenants and properties, raising issues such as retrofitting, digital inclusion and the barriers presented by pre-payment meters – which some customers are reluctant to get rid of as they rely on them for budgeting.

In Wales, many stakeholders cited an interest in fuel poverty, albeit from different angles. Some were focused on working to alleviate fuel poverty among the elderly demographic specifically, while others were interested in helping people to maximise their income or wanted to find out more about government policy on fuel poverty. Many vulnerability service providers were very engaged in the energy sector and were involved in providing day-to-day assistance to communities on PSR referrals, CO detectors, fuel debt, finances and healthy home checks. It was generally felt that as fuel poverty is tied in with various other issues, this makes it difficult to address. Moreover, non-experts on fuel poverty, including some local authority representatives, were interested in fact-finding to ascertain how they can best support local people in fuel poverty. Others approached the matter from an energy efficiency and decarbonisation perspective, stressing the need to ensure that the smart transition does not leave vulnerable or fuel poor customers behind.

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## IMPACT OF COVID-19

In terms of the challenges brought about by Covid-19, stakeholders in the South West expressed concern about the increasing levels of debt and hardship claims, especially among those on low-income jobs who are unable to work from home. Vulnerability support providers noted that they had experienced mistrust from communities they were trying to serve as they had transitioned to working over the telephone and could no longer do in-person visits. Moreover, it was noted that home visits are often essential to get a picture of a vulnerable or fuel poor resident's living conditions and circumstances, so there was concern that those who are digitally excluded may fall through the net.

In Wales, it was noted that Covid-19 had brought new types of fuel poor customer to the fore. Due to a loss of income, it was felt that some people on pre-payment meters had potentially cut themselves off from their homes and were therefore extremely difficult to identify. Others in the 'just about managing' bracket had been pushed into fuel poverty, with the 20% reduction in their pay via the furlough scheme meaning that they had found themselves on the breadline, facing the choice between heating or eating. As in the South West, the point was made that identifying fuel poverty often only scratches the surface, as it is often linked to a myriad of financial, social or health problems. On a more positive note, it was noted that there has been a big move by some organisations to address digital inclusion, such as through enhanced funding for tablets for the elderly.

## FEEDBACK

### 1. What is your role and your reason for participating today?

- "I'm on the poverty panel at a local authority. Obviously, fuel poverty is a very desperate situation to be in and I'm interested to see how you guys can help and support." Local authority member, South West
- "I'm a social landlord and I live in the countryside where the network is terrible. I note that Wales & West Utilities are zero carbon ready, and I'm interested to hear what that means." Housing association, South West
- "I work in the charity sector, currently as a case worker for an energy project. We take enquiries regarding energy problems, which is anything from people having no heating to people having utility debt. It goes on and on. It's one of those things that develops into all sorts of different issues. Once people are involved in the energy aspect we can then as a large organisation actually help people with excessive debt." Vulnerability service provider, South West
- "I'm the assistant clerk of a parish council. We've found, especially since March last year, that there has been a lot of change in people's circumstances. More and more people who have never asked for help before are coming forward, i.e., people who are not normally classed as vulnerable but who have lost jobs or have seen their income reduced. They've found that

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benefits are only just covering their mortgages. I want to see if there's anything we can signpost for these people." Parish / community council, South West

- "I work in the communities team at a housing association, and I look to try to help needy residents with financial and digital inclusion." Housing association, South West
- "I'm from the fire and rescue service. I'm a project manager in home safety. We deliver about 23,000 home visits a year to the vulnerable and carry out risk reduction programmes for fire. We've worked in partnership with Wales & West Utilities in the past." Emergency response, Wales
- "I've been working with fuel poverty and energy efficiency. I'm interested to learn what's going to be happening in future and therefore what to advise people." Vulnerability service provider, Wales
- "I work for a community energy group. We run a fuel poverty project and have a team of eight, including six in-home advisers. We cover five districts in Devon so we're pretty busy all year round. Energy saving is part of what we do. We've helped 700 homes over the last four months. I expect we will be very busy post Covid. We will see a huge increase in debt problems across the country, and that's causing me a lot of concern." Community energy representative, Wales
- "I represent the farming community, landowners and people with a rural interest in life. I'm interested in how Wales & West Utilities works. I'm happy to assist you with your customer needs and vulnerable customers." Business representative, Wales
- "I work for a utility. My team works to support customers in fuel poverty. I'd like to see how we can work collaboratively to overcome the issues faced by both of our customers, which have been exacerbated with Covid." Utility, Wales
- "In my role, we're just completed a consultation on our plan for tackling fuel poverty. This is very well timed and it's interesting to hear what Wales & West Utilities is doing to support vulnerable customers and hopefully we can incorporate some learnings into what we're doing." Government body, Wales

## 2. How has Covid-19 impacted your role and what challenges have you faced?

- "I work in benefits, so we are getting inundated with Covid-19 hardship claims. We're trying to work with different organisations, but helping people get out of poverty is tough right now." Local authority officer, South West
- "We have seen our advice lines double in interest, and there are new people in desperate poverty that we've not met before. We know that those on pre-payment meters just usually cut themselves off, and they go cold. But most don't know what's out there." Vulnerability service provider, South West
- "Ours has changed significantly. We're seeing hundreds of people coming forward who have no idea how to manage their household expenses. People are working from week to week, and

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now that their pay packet is 20% down it's even more difficult. This year has shown up just how delicate a financial balance is. There have also been tremendous problems in relationships and that will have a big impact on housing and the rest." Vulnerability service provider, South West

- "People are at home a lot more; they're using their heating more and earning less, so it's quite concerning, especially with the build-up of debt. Some studies by Cardiff University and others found that Wales has less of the kind of jobs where you can work from home. Towards the end of last year, we produced a fuel poverty monitor, a report across the four nations." Vulnerability service provider, Wales
- "Covid-19 has naturally had a huge impact, but we were inundated with calls about food, medicines, and so on. It's eased off, but we're in recovery mode. Trying to communicate with the over-75s is the challenge, and so I'd like to hear others' ideas." Vulnerability service provider, Wales
- "My team have had to adapt. Rather than travelling to see people, we've had to give advice over the phone, which has been a struggle, as people instinctively mistrust you initially and think that you are trying to sell them something." Business representative, Wales
- "Covid has had a huge impact. People in more deprivation are affected worse because of health, income and employment. They can't work from home or necessarily get to work. We've been inundated by people who have not sought assistance before. We still have our normal service users and this whole new section of society." Vulnerability service provider, Wales
- "Obviously, we can't currently visit our clients in their homes, and it can be a challenge with getting a feel around how they live over the phone, as you're relying on people giving you a mental picture. However, we have had quite a lot of success, to be fair." Vulnerability service provider, Wales
- "Without home visits we can't see the difficulties that customers are in. They may tell us they're OK over the phone, but you need to be there to see what it's like. We had one case where a customer was living in their kitchen because they couldn't afford to heat the whole house. The elderly age group in particular are likely to be shielding." Vulnerability service provider

## SESSION TWO: SUPPORTING CUSTOMERS MOST IN NEED

The second presentation of the day was given by Nigel Winnan, Customer and Social Obligations Manager. Nigel talked stakeholders through Wales & West Utilities' work to support vulnerable customers, including through promotion of the Priority Services Register (PSR) as well as through projects under the New Vulnerability and Carbon Monoxide Allowance (VCMA).

Under the VCMA, which was a separate funding stream to Wales & West Utilities' business-as-usual activities, the company had allocated 70% of funding to vulnerability and 30% to home safety. Turning to the wider Business Plan, Nigel set out Wales & West Utilities' proposed split of spending on vulnerability, including £350k towards fuel poverty / energy efficiency projects, £150k towards broken appliances and CO awareness respectively, and £100k towards community funds.

### WALES & WEST UTILITIES' BUSINESS PLAN – PROPOSED SPLIT OF SPEND

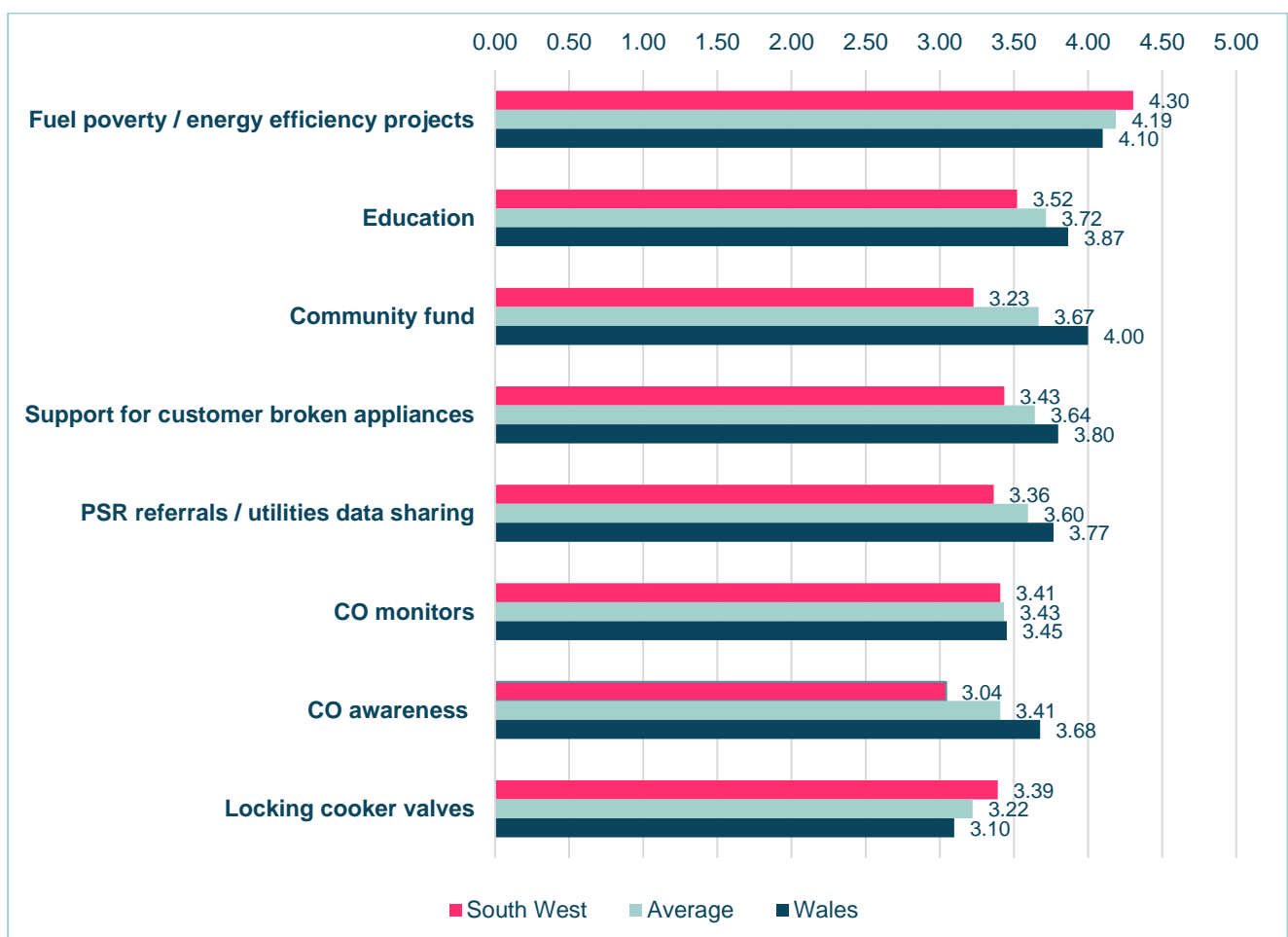
ACTIVITY	YR 1 BUDGET	CUSTOMER OUTCOMES
Fuel poverty / energy efficiency projects	£350k	At least 1,500 homes helped to improve energy efficiency and alleviate fuel poverty
Support for customer broken appliances	£150k	200 households supported to keep safe and warm by helping to fund appliance repairs / replacements
PSR referrals / utilities data sharing	£50k	12,000 more people signed up to benefit from priority services. Data sharing and work to common PSR
Locking cooker valves	£10k	100 homes with early dementia needs helped
CO awareness	£150k	10,000 will be more informed about gas safety as well as wide-reaching awareness campaigns
CO monitors	£75k	5,000 free issue monitors to most at need homes
Education	£75k	Schools education and building upon primary schools work from RIIO GD1 – 2,000 pupils
Work with customer groups	£100k	Focus on services for people living with disabilities, mental health issues and BAME groups
Community fund	£100k	Fund for projects with charities and organisations

When presented with this information, attendees in the South West raised various questions, asking whether Wales & West Utilities had received any feedback on its fuel poverty schemes, including around take-up and their perceived usefulness to customers. They called for more specific examples on some of the areas, including what support for customer appliances Wales & West Utilities was planning to provide for a spend of £150k. In Wales, stakeholders asked about the rationale behind the

split and commented that once broken down into specific areas, the money would not go far without enhanced partnership working. One stakeholder in particular felt DNOs are often constrained by the remit given to them by Ofgem and can be penalised for going too far. It was suggested that unless there was a change to the way energy distributors are regulated, Wales & West Utilities would not be able to go as far as it wants to or enact lasting change.

## VOTING RESULTS

During the voting for this session, stakeholders were asked whether they thought Wales & West Utilities had got its proposed level of spending right for each of the proposed areas, answering on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is 'do a lot less', 3 is 'right level' and 5 is 'do a lot more'. The results from both events are shown below, as well as an average combined result per priority area.



Nb. When asked to vote at the South West workshop, stakeholders were given the option 'Community Fund' but at the workshop aimed at stakeholders in Wales, option was expanded to 'Work with customer groups and establish a community fund'

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## Fuel poverty / energy efficiency

In the South West, the highest-rated activity by a considerable margin was ‘fuel poverty / energy efficiency projects’, receiving an average vote of 4.3 and indicating that stakeholders want Wales & West Utilities to go further in this area. Importantly, this was the only activity where no stakeholders thought Wales & West Utilities should do less. This was borne out in the discussions, where it was felt Wales & West Utilities could ensure smarter collaboration with partner organisations to make the money dedicated to fuel poverty or energy efficiency go even further. It was mentioned that more support would be needed in this area post Covid, as more people are using food banks or are finding themselves relying on benefits, and the case was made for directing more funding to this area, given its overlap with areas such as ‘support for customer broken appliances’ and ‘CO monitors’. As for concrete suggestions, it was suggested that Wales & West Utilities could offer practical assistance to fuel poor customers, such as help with budgeting.

This sentiment was reflected at the Wales event, where ‘fuel poverty / energy efficiency’ also scored highest of all the areas with 4.10. In the discussions, it was felt that as a subset of poverty in general, fuel poverty needs to be considered as part of a government-led strategy. For example, it was commented that issues relating to wider poverty, such as poor property maintenance, mean that some fuel poverty measures can’t be installed in the first place. In terms of what Wales & West Utilities could do to help alleviate fuel poverty, it was felt that the company could ‘upskill’ its customers on energy matters in general. One practical suggestion was for customers to be helped to make sense of their energy bills, so that they feel confident enough to switch supplier. In particular, elderly people may be wasting their disposable income on an extortionate energy tariff out of a reluctance to change, so it was felt Wales & West Utilities could empower them to make better decisions. In the longer term, it was felt that Wales & West Utilities needs to ensure that any customer – fuel poor or otherwise – can connect to the grid, indicating that attendees want to see a fair transition to the smart energy future.

## Education

‘Education’ also scored quite highly in the South West with 3.52, despite the fact that the majority of stakeholders (57%) thought the level of ambition was about right. Suggestions in this area included working with schools to raise awareness of the climate emergency (and therefore the need for energy efficiency) and to offer practical advice on how to read meters and energy bills, as well as manage finances and household expenditure. This area also generated a lot of discussion in Wales, where it scored more highly with 3.87. It was suggested that Wales & West Utilities could target primary schools for fire / gas safety and secondary schools for CO awareness – perhaps implying that Wales & West Utilities should look to ensure continuity in its educational programmes in schools. Beyond schools, it was felt that customers could benefit from education on broader life skills, such as budgeting. The

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example was given of customers on pre-payment meters, who would arguably not need to rely on pre-payment meters to budget if they could learn the right money saving and budgeting skills.

### **Support for customer broken appliances**

As for ‘support for broken appliances’, attendees at the South West event felt Wales & West Utilities had the right level of ambition on this (3.44 / 5) while attendees at the Wales event scored it slightly higher (3.80), suggesting that they want to see Wales & West Utilities go further. In fact, this was the only priority area at the Wales event where no stakeholder felt Wales & West Utilities should reduce its level of ambition, and it was felt that this is a clear and practicable way for Wales & West Utilities to help its customers. Although some stakeholders made the point that there is already support out there for broken appliances, it was felt that boiler repairs and maintenance needs to be incorporated into this activity area – a sentiment that was also expressed at the South West event. In this respect, stakeholders were unsure as to whether emergency financial support for low-income groups should fall under this area or under ‘fuel poverty / energy efficiency’. Moreover, as some customers may not necessarily qualify for support for broken appliances, it was felt that Wales & West Utilities needs to invest more to identify and assist these marginal customers.

### **CO awareness / monitors**

The lowest-scoring area in the South West was ‘CO awareness’ – although it must be noted that stakeholders do not want Wales & West Utilities to do less in this area as they still gave it a score of 3.04 on average (‘right level’). In the discussion, it was felt that ‘CO awareness’ could be incorporated into ‘education’ – which potentially explains the lower ambition in this area. In Wales, however, ‘CO awareness’ still scored relatively highly (3.68 / 5), with stakeholders commenting that this is particularly important for private rental properties which do not necessarily have CO alarms and feeling that this area is critically important given the severe and sometimes fatal risks to health.

A corresponding activity, ‘CO monitors’, did rank slightly higher with 3.41, although 64% of stakeholders voted for 3 (‘right level’) – and, in fact, this represented the greatest level of consensus across all activities voted on in the South West. At the Wales event, ‘CO monitors’ was the lowest-scoring area and was not commented on in the discussions.

### **Community fund**

“Although Community fund was ranked second lowest in the South West event, for the second workshop, focused on stakeholders in Wales, further detail was added to this and stakeholders voted on the statement “Work with customer groups and establish a community fund”. This second statement



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received much more support, with 41% of attendees thinking that WWU should go a lot further in this area.

However, this area did not generate much discussion. In the South West, one stakeholder suggested that the money under this area should be incorporated into 'education', though the point was made that education needs to be delivered across the whole community. In Wales, it was suggested that Wales & West Utilities could partner with community food banks as a way of identifying those who may be in need of assistance, whether experiencing transient or long-term fuel poverty.

### **PSR referrals / utilities data sharing**

This area scored slightly higher in Wales with 3.77 / 5 (compared to 3.36 / 5 in the South West) – perhaps reflecting the higher proportion of vulnerability service providers in attendance at this event. However, stakeholders did not discuss this area in detail at either event.

### **Locking cooker valves**

Taken as an average of both events, this area scored the lowest overall and it was not commented on in detail by stakeholders – except by one local authority representative, who suggested that Wales & West utilities could partner with councils in this area.

## **BARRIERS TO FUEL POVERTY / ENERGY EFFICIENCY**

Stakeholders also discussed the potential barriers to alleviating fuel poverty / promoting energy efficiency. In the South West, it was commented that the increase in remote working during the pandemic had made it harder to do home visits and reach the less digitally engaged. Moreover, while organisations can provide people with financial contributions towards broken appliances or new heating systems, it was noted that some properties – particularly older and listed properties – have existing efficiency issues which are harder to address, such as single-pane windows or a lack of carpeting. As a result, customers in such properties are at a disadvantage and inevitably use more energy to heat their homes.

In Wales, it was commented that some customers don't meet the eligibility criteria for assistance and subsequently fall through the net, while elderly people may require help but are too proud to ask for it. As a potential solution to these barriers, it was suggested that Wales & West Utilities could partner with smaller expert organisations that can do a lot with very little money, as well as with more outward-facing organisations that have a natural link to customers, from community groups to emergency services and property managers. It was felt that partnering on fuel poverty / energy efficiency would ensure that Wales & West Utilities' does not place huge demands on its existing teams or lose sight of

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what it is delivering. Partnering would also ensure that the knock-on issues that fuel poverty causes can be passed on to and addressed by the relevant organisation and would ensure that Wales & West Utilities' is not starting from a point of initial investment but is adding to pools of existing funding.

## **INCREASING SIGN-UPS TO THE PRIORITY SERVICES REGISTER**

Lastly, stakeholders discussed how Wales & West Utilities could get people to sign up for the Priority Services Register (PSR). In the South West, stakeholders suggested that the PSR could be promoted through parish council networks which have their own WhatsApp groups and websites, as well as charities – both through nationwide campaigns and at a more local level in charity shops. It was felt that people don't understand what the PSR is or how it can benefit them, so simple and clear messaging from Wales & West Utilities' is vital to increase the sign-up rate.

In Wales, stakeholders also stressed the importance of partnership working, including through registered social landlords, which already have a trusted link to local communities, and organisations that do home visits. The idea was raised that Wales & West Utilities should take a regional approach given that the administrative set-up of each local area is different. For example, while some local councils rely heavily on community groups, other councils will have different networks which Wales & West Utilities should research and tap into.

## **FEEDBACK**

### **1. Is the split of projects for the VCMA still valid? If not, which areas should receive more/less focus?**

- “From our perspective, the one that we need more focus on is about how we can work together on fuel poverty / energy efficiency projects to make the money go a little bit further than it goes at the moment.” Housing association, South West
- “I think looking down that list, I'm keen to get people out of fuel poverty. In Wychavon, 60% live rurally which means we have a lot of people off grid, so we probably have more people in fuel poverty. I'm not sure on this list that there is anything about the network. That would be my thing: ensuring people are put on the grid and have cheaper gas. I am fully in favour of the education of CO, I think that is a great thing. I wasn't aware of the PSR, but I will take that away.” Local authority member, South West
- “For me, when approaching these splits, I think that the most important thing is for Wales & West Utilities to listen to what the demand is among our customers and place its focus accordingly. I generally feel that it is doing that.” Housing association, South West
- “Working with people day in day out and trying to give people short lessons in how to read a bill has shown me that by the time they've got to me, they've already given up any idea of

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learning how to do anything. My point is that if you catch them young you've got them for life.” Vulnerability service provider, South West

- “As much as I agree that CO awareness is important, I am surprised to see that much being spent per person. I think that it would be good to shift some of that money towards replacing appliances.” Local authority member, South West
- “It doesn't seem a lot per home. None of the budget seems a lot, including the education budget. When it's broken down into everything you've got to cover, the individual budgets don't seem high enough for the area you're covering. For example, broken customer appliances has to support 200 households. That's less than £1,000 for each household.” Vulnerability service provider, Wales
- “There is quite a lot of support out there for broken appliances through other schemes, but there's often a shortfall for some of the more complex appliances. Also, with £350k, the target for that should be more than 1,500 homes. I could help 4,500 homes with that I'd say, so I'd set the ambition higher for fuel poverty / energy efficiency projects. I'm broadly happy with the spread of spend, though.” Community energy representative, Wales
- “The trick is how you prioritise. You can be more ambitious in one area but what impact does that have on the others? Another challenging thing is that there are different pots of funding in England and Wales, so how can you ensure that you're not intentionally or unintentionally duplicating funding?” Housing association, Wales
- “The broken appliances coverage is all well and good, but I don't think that boiler maintenance and servicing is covered sufficiently. This is a problem, as some people cannot afford to maintain their boilers, which will often lead to them failing. If Wales & West Utilities could put forward some money earlier in this area, it may not need to spend as much long term.” Vulnerability service provider, Wales
- “I think the most positive thing from my point of view is the support for customers' broken appliances. We help a lot of people get Nest, but there are some people who've either had it before or don't qualify, and they're living in fuel poverty and can't afford to have the boiler repaired. It's incredible how bad fuel poverty is in this country considering we are a wealthy nation, and it does need to be addressed.” Vulnerability service provider, Wales

## 2. Which of these activities is most important to you and why?

- “I'm glad to see partnerships with the PSR. Individuals knowing they only have to go through that process once is vital.” Vulnerability service provider, South West
- “I would like to know how Wales & West Utilities is planning to signpost vulnerable customers towards these funds.” Vulnerability service provider, South West
- “I think education is really important. I used to teach PSHE and gradually that subject has got smaller and smaller because they said there wasn't time in the curriculum. Schools need to

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take this kind of thing seriously and recognise that it's an important part of the curriculum. People have no idea about bills." Parish / community council, South West

- "With broken appliances it's difficult as people need to be in receipt of a qualifying benefit to receive assistance. If not, they may be on furlough or on a reduced income and they cannot afford a new appliance. It would be good to have that fund there as a go-to. For some people, they're on the breadline but do not qualify for universal credit for different reasons." Vulnerability service provider, Wales
- "Many people don't understand their bills and need help with general budgeting. The education commitment here seems to only cover schools, but I would look to try and help to instil this vital life skill within people somewhere within that. It will also make people more confident around switching suppliers and will keep people ahead of the game." Vulnerability service provider, Wales
- "The difficult thing is, if you want anything done better in life, it costs more. Intelligent electric heating systems sound fantastic, and they make homes more energy efficient, but the cost of electric is higher than gas. By doing something more energy efficient, we could potentially be putting people in greater fuel poverty because their bills will be going up. That's a concern for me. It's wonderful that we want to make the world greener, but it's always the people at the bottom who get punished and that can't be right." Housing association, Wales
- "They're all important, I agree. We'd like to see more money in support of broken appliances and community funds, because we work with those crises. The carbon monoxide awareness and monitors are important too." Vulnerability service provider, Wales

### 3. Has COVID-19 changed our stakeholder priorities?

- "We are finding that people with common ownership properties are coming to us now, due to being furloughed, so it's clear that fuel poverty is affecting a wider range of people now." Housing association, South West
- "We would like Wales & West Utilities to signpost new charity pots and funding avenues that we can use to help our customers, as we only have a finite number of resources at our fingertips. People are panicking now, as so many of them have lost their jobs. Any extra resources that we can provide would be great." Housing association, South West
- "I don't deal with budgeting, so these figures don't mean too much to me, but you can always do more to help customers, irrespective of whether Covid has changed things." Vulnerability service provider, Wales
- "In general, fuel poverty has become a bigger issue over the last few months. There are extra expenses. It's raising awareness. For front-line staff, it's vital. We need to know what organisations are out there. With the people that I help, disabilities and mental health are huge

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issues. Focusing on services for those groups is becoming more important.” Housing association, Wales

- “I think that it has exacerbated the issue of fuel poverty, meaning that more people are getting sucked into that bracket.” Vulnerability service provider, Wales

#### **4. We have allocated a large amount of money for energy efficiency and fuel poverty initiatives. What do you perceive as the main barriers in addressing these challenges and how can they be overcome?**

- “The most fuel-poor areas are in fact the most affluent parts of our district. The fuel poor customers there are often elderly people living in big houses that they cannot afford to heat. The challenge that we have identified in helping them is the distinct lack of correlation between EPCs and fuel poverty, meaning that it is difficult to target measures to these households that need them, due to their EPC rating.” Local authority officer, South West
- “A huge issue is still the prevalence of pre-payment meters. Customers using them are often among the poorest, but the meter rates are always far higher than direct debits. This means that any work that we do with customers to get their bills down is hamstrung.” Local authority officer, South West
- “I’m trying to work out how best to use this information. My parish is one of the most rural in the South West, and we have fairly poorly paid employment, and so there are many who might be interested in some of those schemes. We don’t have many housing associations, so I wonder whether, as a parish council, we can be a conduit towards what is available.” Parish / Community council, South West
- “I think there are more front-facing organisations that could administrate this money. The key to this being utilised well is how connected it is for the client. From my perspective, councils are the most front facing for people who need fuel poverty support in particular. It’s hard enough to get people to come for help as it is. I’d say we’re the best port of call for them in an acute crisis.” Local authority member, Wales
- “Maybe another organisation could help you manage the funding. I used to work for Welsh Water, and we found that if you don’t have a resource at your organisation, all these different funding pots can put big demands on your teams and then you lose sight of what you can deliver. I think you’d benefit from a broker who can chair this funding alongside your organisation.” Housing association, Wales
- “As a small organisation we struggle to find enough funding and we don’t need an awful lot. We can help a lot of homes with a relatively small budget. Sometimes it’s very simple measures we’re helping people with, like installing draft excluders, changing lightbulbs to LEDs or ringing up the supplier to get them on better tariffs.” Community energy representative, Wales

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## 5. How can we improve how we get people to sign up to the Priority Services Register?

- “I think a great way of getting the message out is through promotion. We would probably put it on our newsletter or on our website. I would recommend strongly working through the parish councils who are now setting up WhatsApp groups and websites. On a daily basis, I would try and get influence through the parishes.” Local authority member, South West
- “I like the idea of using social media, but I do wonder whether the message would get to people who do not have internet and would likely really need the PSR.” Local authority member, South West
- “I think that greater partnerships with charities such as Age Concern would be effective here. For example, leaflets and posters about PSR measures could be placed in charity shops and could spread key information.” Vulnerability service provider, South West
- “Within councils and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), there are teams that deal with supporting vulnerable clients. We are best placed to liaise with those clients. We’ve got that trusted link, in the same way as Citizens Advice does. I think you’d be best off using us. We have hardship funds that we already use. This year particularly, these funds are being stretched. I’m fully on board with energy efficiency projects but at the moment, a focus on fuel poverty would be best. Also, if you use us, we could give you data and feed it back to you. We are audited.” Local authority member, Wales
- “Fuel poverty and energy efficiency do go hand in hand. The point about councils is that it’s not the same in all areas. In Devon, the councils rely on the community energy groups, so what works in Wales via the councils might not work in other areas.” Community energy representative, Wales
- “At Care & Repair, it works well for us to identify people through home visits.” Vulnerability service provider, Wales

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## **SESSION THREE: CARBON MONOXIDE AWARENESS – A TARGETED APPROACH**

The third session of the workshop was given by Elizabeth Warwick, Stakeholder Engagement Manager. Elizabeth began by explaining the importance of carbon monoxide awareness. As an odourless and tasteless gas, carbon monoxide (CO) can lead to poisoning which results in 40 fatalities and over 4,000 injuries in the UK every year.

Elizabeth talked stakeholders through some practical steps to reduce the risk of CO poisoning, such as ensuring that gas appliances are regularly serviced and having a CO alarm that conforms with the British Standard. She then outlined Wales & West Utilities' three-pronged approach to CO awareness, based on a for-life focus for primary school children, awareness raising for at-risk groups and CO monitor provision for at-risk groups. According to the findings of a research project conducted by Wales & West Utilities, young people and unemployed people are the least likely to have a CO alarm or consider annual gas servicing as important. On the basis of the findings, Wales & West Utilities is planning to target young people via a new campaign, as well as maintain its proven effective engagement with schools.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR PARTNERSHIPS FOR CARBON MONOXIDE AWARENESS**

Stakeholders made a range of suggestions for partnership working in this area. In the South West, it was commented that Wales & West Utilities could place adverts in and around schools – including at school bus stops. For younger children, one stakeholder suggested that catchy videos can be an effective tool. To target the elderly, it was felt that Wales & West Utilities could work with demographic-specific charities such as Age UK, as well as places that elderly people tend to frequent, such as GP surgeries and supermarkets. Other groups to target included landlord forums, town council networks, carers and support networks, youth panels at housing associations and local energy groups, such as through social media platforms such as Facebook. Across the board, it was mentioned that Wales & West Utilities could provide a gas safety leaflet each time a broken appliance is fixed.

In Wales, attendees suggested that Wales & West Utilities could increase its presence in campaigns such as Gas Safety Week and at events such as Freshers Fairs. In terms of raising awareness among children at primary schools, it was felt that Wales & West Utilities should bear in mind that some children have experienced increased anxiety levels during the pandemic, so any gas safety messages need to be delivered in a delicate way – and using media such as school newsletters was felt to be a good way of getting through to parents instead. One charity representative noted that while there is a range of outreach targeted at the elderly, families are the hardest group to reach. Social services was suggested as a potential partner in this area to ensure that vulnerability is addressed holistically, although this support would only extend to families already involved in the welfare system. Moreover,

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it was felt that Wales & West Utilities should lobby government to make CO alarms mandatory in rented property. Other partners not mentioned in the South West included Job Centres and student letting agencies.

## **MAXIMISING REACH AND CONVINCING CUSTOMERS TO TAKE ACTION**

In terms of how Wales & West Utilities could maximise its reach and convince people to take action, stakeholders in the South West suggested that clearer messaging was needed on carbon monoxide, which could take the form of a simple ‘signs to look out for’ campaign – either for symptoms of CO poisoning or indications that there is a CO leak in a property, such as gas appliances burning with a yellow rather than a blue flame. One representative from a housing association commented that messaging is often more effective when it includes real people and real-life examples. A generational divide was alluded to, with attendees noting that the elderly are less digitally engaged and therefore rely on physical information, such as notices in libraries or newspapers. However, stakeholders were keen for Wales & West Utilities to think outside the box here, suggesting that information sent to people’s homes could still be in an innovative format, such as a postcard, to stop people from throwing it away without reading it. For the social media generation, it was felt that Wales & West Utilities could use platforms such as TikTok. Other groups that Wales & West Utilities would need to target included customers with learning difficulties and customers not in education or employment.

This was echoed in Wales, where stakeholders raised the idea of involving Instagram influencers in public messaging campaigns on gas safety. Another closely linked suggestion was for Wales & West Utilities to run TV advertising campaigns on this to engage a broader demographic and bring the message to the forefront of people’s minds. That said, stakeholders did see the value in tailoring communication strategies – with one housing authority representative noting that they had identified different customer strands and had employed different methods of communication accordingly, such as digivans and easy-read information. For example, it was felt that a handbook containing go-to health and safety information or a gas safety advert in a free newspaper – while not appealing to the masses – might still be read by certain customer groups. Regardless of the medium chosen, it was felt that Wales & West Utilities has to get the right message across – namely that a CO alarm is a line of defence but is no substitute for regular gas checks and maintenance.

## **FEEDBACK**

### **1. Apart from these organisations, who else do you think we should be working with to reach our target audiences?**

- “I think that Wales & West Utilities should be looking to establish itself on housing association youth panels. This is because engaging with young people is often a major challenge and we



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should be hearing directly from young people about what their needs are, rather than guessing.”  
Housing association, South West

- “Wales & West Utilities should working with schools to develop engaging resources, which will excite children and get them talking about these issues with their parents. It’s very hard getting teenagers enthusiastic about this sort of stuff, so you should be looking to start young.” Local authority officer, South West
- “I think that deeper partnerships with Age UK, the Carers’ Association and GP surgeries would help Wales & West Utilities to reach more elderly audiences. GP surgeries in particular would be key to this strategy, as they are often the only places that elderly people would go and engage closely with public bodies. As a result, there are opportunities here to equip receptionists with information to help them solve problems for these people.” Vulnerability service provider, South West
- “Health Connections work very closely with village agents, who have their ears to the ground and are the first port of call for someone if they are in need.” Parish / Community council, South West
- “I’d like to see some lobbying to the government as well to make CO alarms a legal requirement in privately rented homes. They’ve done it for smoke alarms, but I would like to see it done for carbon monoxide as well.” Vulnerability service provider, Wales
- “There seems to be a big void in general support for people just leaving school and either starting work or a degree. So many life skills are not really sufficiently taught at schools in a way that flows into real life.” Vulnerability service provider, Wales
- “Councils are fairly well placed, but the types of queries we get don’t tend to facilitate these CO awareness campaigns.” Local authority member, Wales
- “I think community project funds would be a good avenue. In addition, I would advocate establishing more robust referral lines with Citizens Advice and Age Wales. The more joined-up we are, the less likely vulnerable people are to fall through the net.” Vulnerability service provider, Wales
- “We do home visits. We do promote this as part of our conversations. We check the state of boilers and see if they have CO alarms. We run through the CO theme with every single client. We deliver talks to elderly groups to raise awareness.” Vulnerability service provider, Wales

## **2. Do you have any thoughts on what approach might maximise our reach and likelihood of people taking action?**

- “Our customers always respond to information with real people and real stories in it. I’d also note that carers and support networks would be a key stakeholder in any communications on CO.” Housing association, South West

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- “Quite a lot of older people are not on social media or online at all. I’m wondering about actual physical signs in supermarkets. The people that are going out, that’s exactly where they’re going.” Parish / community council, South West
  - “Just before the pandemic, we gave our operatives a stack of postcards featuring telephone numbers for dealing with problems and information about grants available. When the pandemic hit, people were using them to call us as they could see the information on their fridges. Placing physical information in individuals’ homes could be really effective.” Housing association, South West
  - “Acorn characterises households based on certain attributes and subdivides them into types and tells you their preferred communication strand.” Emergency response, Wales
  - “Because of the age group, 16-24, you’ve got to go on social media. Even your Instagram, you could put some videos out there, or even get some influencers to put some small videos out. That’s how you will hit that age group.” Vulnerability service provider, Wales
  - “Have you thought about TikTok? We work with LEAP. They put up one of their videos and they got over 1000 referrals in one day. It jammed the phone lines and they had to shut them! If there’s a way of targeting specific areas, a video about CO poisoning might be good.” Community energy representative, Wales
  - “You could have a public campaign to highlight the issues and point people to places where they can get information or actual monitors where needed. Now and again, once a quarter, you could have a public announcement campaign to join up the doubts. A lot of the vulnerable people are digitally excluded. Other than through posters in surgeries or on TV, there’s not another quick way to get to them.” Vulnerability service provider, Wales

### **3. Do you have any other points you would like to make regarding any of the topics we’ve discussed today?**

- “I agree on the value of Wales & West Utilities being a key person to reinforce the messages on safety. People trust you.” Local authority officer, South West
- “I would like to see more carbon monoxide funding allocated towards servicing elderly customers’ boilers and educating them about the need to do so.” Vulnerability service provider, South West
- “I would like to reiterate the importance of using local council members to get the message out there. If they could have something small to distribute to local people, engagement could really increase.” Local authority member, South West
- “I’m trying to think of some other outlet through which you could get through to people. We do a lot of work with parish councils but that’s not going to be 16–24-year-olds and busy families. With Covid you now have more local community engagement. Maybe getting in touch with rotary clubs to see if they could do letter drops or events would be good. Even on social media

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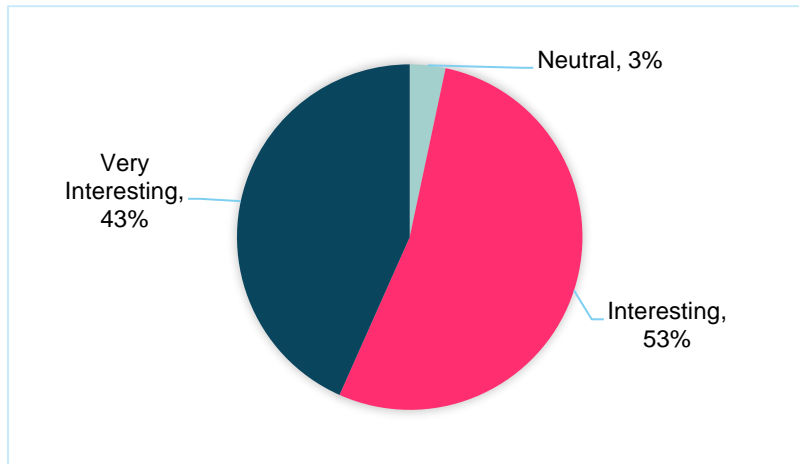
people are more engaged with local groups. If the fire brigade have gone out to fit alarms, for example, the local community should know about it.” Housing association, Wales

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## APPENDIX 1: WORKSHOP FEEDBACK

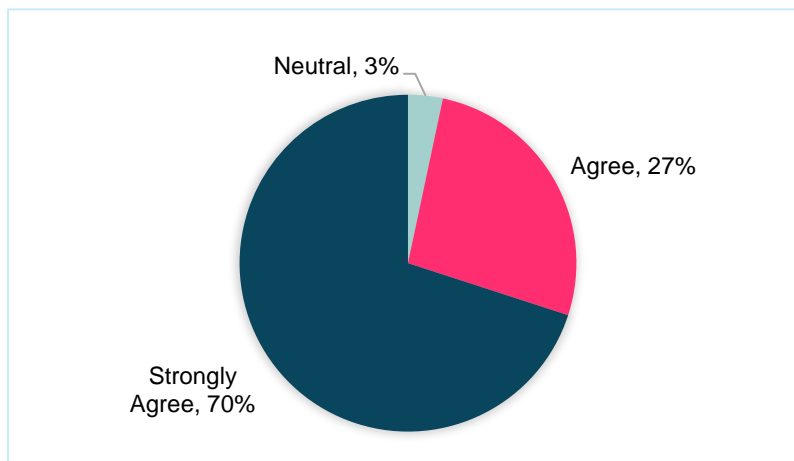
After the workshop, stakeholders were asked to complete a short feedback form. Some of the key findings are shown below.

**Overall, did you find this event to be:**



- “I found this very useful to get an understanding of what Initiatives Wales & West run and how we could work with you to get our joint message across.”
- “I learned a lot about new initiatives and what is available to help my clients in need.”
- “It was my first meeting with you, and it was good to link up.”

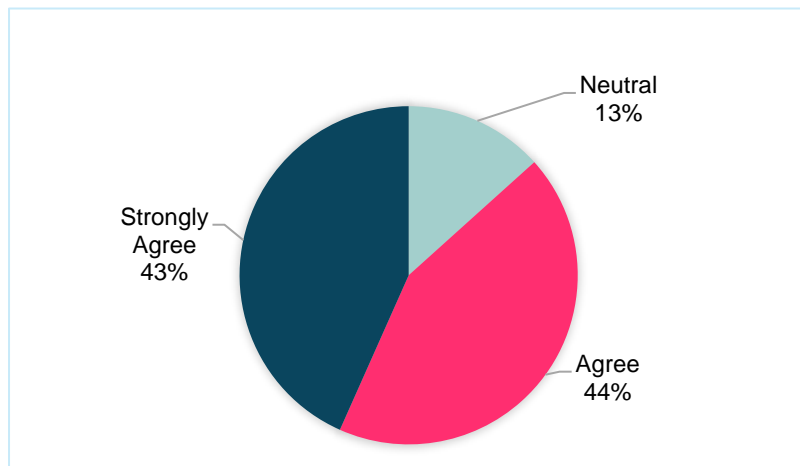
**Did you feel that you had the opportunity to make your points and ask questions?**



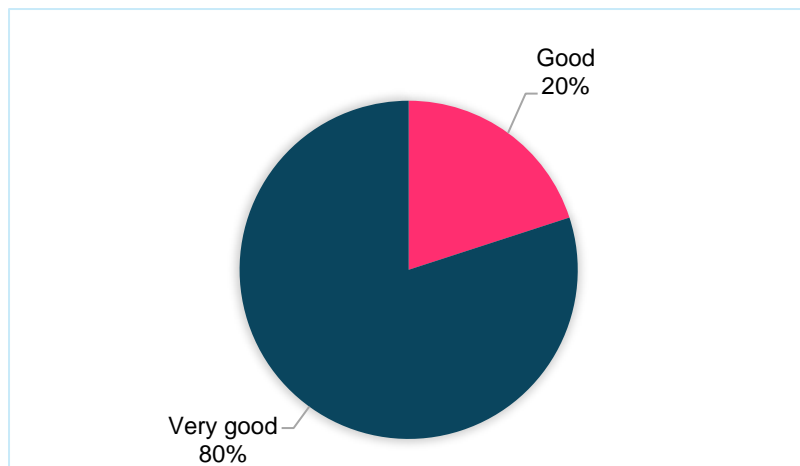
- “Breakout sessions were full inclusive, and everyone had the opportunity to have a say.”
- “Excellent use of breakout rooms.”

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## Did we cover the right topics for you on the day?



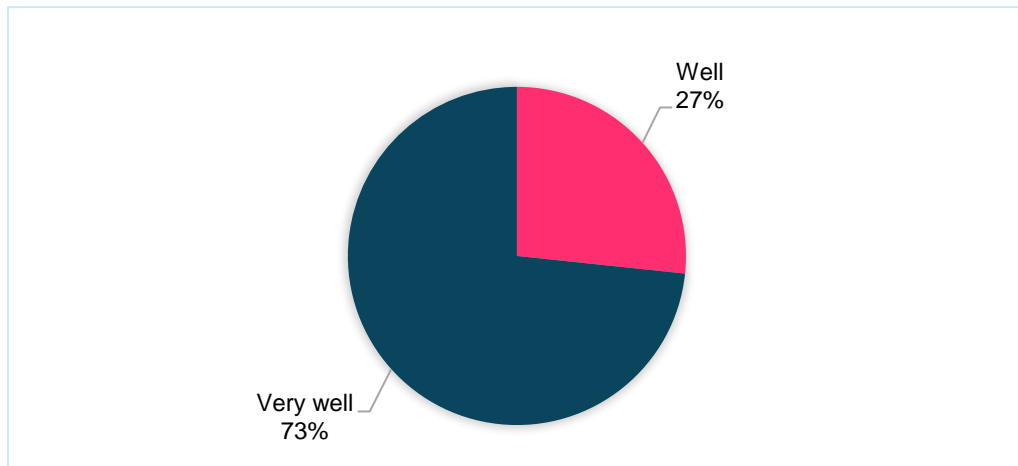
## What did you think of the way the workshop was chaired by your facilitator?



- “Our facilitator was excellent and managed the group well.”
- “Got people involved and managed the tech very well, not always easy!”
- “Very professional.”

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## How well do you think the online format worked?



## Do you have any other comments?

- “An excellent session, very well organised with useful content and fully functioning tech.”
- “Perhaps some time to allow delegates to ask questions would have been useful.”
- “I think great representation across all the organisations and some good discussions and engagement taking place.”
- “More time in breakout sessions or more sessions with less people so everyone can contribute. The positives are there is so much more to discuss.”



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