

# Engaging with customers in vulnerable situations: a research guide

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# Introduction

## Wales & West Utilities

The idea for this guide came about as a result of working on a long-term project looking at the needs and circumstances of customers in vulnerable situations with Mindset Research – an experienced research consultancy. As a gas network, we provide essential gas services to 7.5 million people across Wales and the south west of England, so it is important we understand how we can best support those customers who need extra support, especially when their gas supplies are interrupted. We don't send customers bills as our services are charged through gas suppliers' bills, so we rely on insight and research to find out more about who our customers are and what they need and expect from their gas network.

We hope this guide offers some insight and support for other research projects that ultimately shape support services for some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

**Sarah Hopkins** People & Engagement Director, Wales & West Utilities

## Mindset Research

Having planned this programme, undertaken the research and analysed the findings and their implications for Wales & West Utilities, it was clear to us that our experiences might be of interest to other organisations supporting individuals in vulnerable situations and wishing to improve and enhance the services and support they offer.

We believe that the approach to this project has been innovative in the extent to which it has sought to engage in a meaningful way with a wide cross-section of individuals in vulnerable situations as well as those who care for them.

Importantly, the exercise was designed solely with a view to understanding the needs and circumstances of the potentially vulnerable by finding the best way to engage with individuals in this category and those who care for them in a professional capacity.

In contrast, our wider research experience of working across other industries and sectors is that, too often, the potentially vulnerable are simply treated as a sub-set of all customers and as a consequence, tried and tested methodologies that work well for the public in general are just 'made to fit' for this audience, resulting in insights that lack depth and actionability.

In this guide we have shared what we have learnt.

**Martin Olver** Managing Director, Mindset Research

### ● Part 1

of this guide provides a very brief overview of Wales & West Utilities' extensive engagement programme.

### ● Part 2

provides practical advice to organisations wishing to undertake research with people in vulnerable situations.

# Part 1 Wales & West Utilities' engagement programme

## Outline of objectives and methodology

The overall focus of this extensive research programme, conducted over a period spanning more than two years, was simple: how can Wales & West Utilities enhance and develop the provision it already has in place to support those in vulnerable situations? Wales & West Utilities' commitment to the programme was clear in its openness to different approaches, committing time and resources over a considerable period of time. After extensive discussion, it was agreed that the overall approach should encompass three distinct phases, with the findings of each phase shaping the design and content of the next. To this end, three phases were undertaken as follows:

### Phase 1 Understanding needs and circumstances

The initial focus of the programme adopted a 'back to basics' approach to developing an understanding of how Wales & West Utilities can enhance and develop the provision it has in place to support those in vulnerable situations. Instead of testing ideas, the focus here was on understanding the range of needs and circumstances likely to be encountered, in order that the development of services and support should have its foundations firmly in the needs and circumstances of the most vulnerable.

### Phase 2 Testing concepts

The second phase followed on directly from the previous work and was designed to sharpen the focus, looking specifically at how a range of support measures and initiatives (emerging out of the findings of Phase 1) might have relevance to those in the most vulnerable circumstances. The framework adopted for interviews was based around presenting a range of support measures and initiatives, understanding the potential appeal and value of each and, in broad terms, producing an overall ranking, together with suggestions for further improving support measures. Through this process Wales & West Utilities was able to gain an understanding of what is important to its customers in vulnerable situations, in a way that helped it to consider how best to allocate and direct its resources in the most effective way.

### Phase 3 Refining plans, services and support

Phase 3 was all about ensuring that Wales & West Utilities had correctly heard and interpreted what was indicated to be important to these groups (at Phases 1 and 2) and to clarify these priorities within the context of Wales & West Utilities' draft business plan (which sets out what it plans to deliver between 2021 and 2026). In particular, the work undertaken here was aimed at evaluating the extent to which Wales & West Utilities' commitments and promises contained in the plan to support potential vulnerability were a true reflection of what customers in vulnerable situations had asked for at Phases 1 and 2.

## Scoping the audience

### Nature of vulnerability

● The first question to tackle was: who is vulnerable and who should the research programme encompass? Clearly, there are no easy answers here. Vulnerability takes many forms and often, for an individual their degree of vulnerability evolves and fluctuates over time and/or can be dependent on circumstances. Our first reference point was the definition of vulnerability developed by the energy regulator, Ofgem.

● It was also helpful to consider the Priority Services Register (PSR) and its eligibility criteria, namely that individuals:

- are of pensionable age
- are disabled or chronically sick
- have a long-term medical condition
- have a hearing or visual impairment or additional communication needs
- are in a vulnerable situation.

● We used these definitions as a starting point for designing a research sample that would offer good representation across the range of vulnerabilities Wales & West Utilities is likely to encounter on a day-to-day basis. To give ourselves the best chance of hearing about diverse needs and circumstances, we set very clear quotas (or targets) in relation to specific types of vulnerability. For example, we set targets for consulting with individuals representing a range of chronic illnesses, single parents with children aged under five, pensioners and individuals with a range of disabilities.

● We also considered factors potentially affecting vulnerability such as reliance on benefits and qualifying under the “fuel poverty” definition. Additional demographic variables such as age, housing tenure and ethnicity were also factored in and reflected across the sample.

● Wales & West Utilities’ network stretches from north Wales to the southern tip of Cornwall. Its customers live in a variety of urban, suburban and rural situations, all of which

### According to Ofgem:

“We define vulnerability as when a consumer’s personal circumstances and characteristics combine with aspects of the market to create situations where they are:

- significantly less able than a typical consumer to protect or represent his or her interests in the energy market
- significantly more likely than a typical consumer to suffer detriment, or that detriment is likely to be more substantial”



# Part 1 Wales & West Utilities' engagement programme

are likely in some way to impact on the degree to which someone might find himself or herself in a vulnerable situation. Consequently, at all stages of our research programme, respondents were recruited across a wide range of locations in Wales and south west England.

- Given the fundamental requirement to properly understand the needs and circumstances of people in vulnerable situations, a qualitative approach to research was absolutely necessary (ie adopting a methodology in which depth of understanding takes priority over building a degree of statistical confidence in the findings). Taking this approach inevitably demands a degree of pragmatism in defining the scope and composition of the sample: the sample is unlikely to perfectly represent the population of potentially vulnerable people in Wales & West Utilities' region but it does offer insights across a very broad group of individuals, representing an enormously diverse set of needs and circumstances.

## The importance of care professionals

- From an early stage in the programme, the decision was made to seek inputs from the “professional carer” community. This was because:
  - Their range of experience across different needs and vulnerabilities is invaluable.
  - Some of the most vulnerable members of society, including many living independently, are difficult or inappropriate to target as potential respondents in a research study. For example, some individuals in vulnerable situations, particularly those with a

degree of emotional vulnerability, would be reluctant or unable to take part. Similarly, it would be inappropriate to interview in-depth on a one-to-one basis individuals with conditions such as dementia (even in the presence of a trusted and familiar person).

- Carers are well placed to offer an objective view of vulnerability, its impacts and how it can be supported. It was evident that, among our sample of customers – all recruited because of clear vulnerabilities – some were reluctant to acknowledge their vulnerability or were quick to downplay its significance.
- Securing an input from this community helped us think about the findings of the interviews with customers in vulnerable situations in a broader context, allowing us to consider the “micro” needs and preferences of the individuals represented alongside the “macro” needs and preferences suggested by our sample of care professionals.

### Example: Mr J

Recruited on the basis of being diabetic, from the outset he played down his illness. Over the course of the interview it emerged that, in addition, he has kidney dialysis three times a week and, a legacy of his career as a miner, suffers from pneumoconiosis which severely limits his lung capacity.

When asked what measures he would require should there be an interruption to the gas, he said “I'd throw another blanket on I guess”. (He was unaware of the PSR).

## Methodologies

● The suitability to any given audience of a particular means of engagement depends on many factors. The options open to us in what was a qualitative study were numerous. Having given careful consideration to many ways of capturing insights, both from customers in vulnerable situations and from care professionals, the following approach was adopted throughout the programme:

### 1 For customers in vulnerable situations

one-to-one, in-depth, face-to-face interviews conducted in respondents' own homes, sometimes in the presence of a family member or other trusted individual.

### 2 For care professionals

a mix of one-to-one, face-to-face, in-depth interviews, paired depths and “mini focus” groups.

Both forms of research were completed before the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic and associated social distancing rules.

● As the project progressed, the importance of triangulating the feedback from the different audiences – customers and care professionals – became clear. Very often it was found that care professionals perceived individuals' vulnerabilities as being more debilitating, when viewed in the context of the way in which people in vulnerable situations tended to view themselves. A key consideration in presenting findings and drawing conclusions was the need to strike a balance between the different evidence bases (ie the differing perspectives on vulnerability, its nature, seriousness and impact from those living with it and from those observing it).



## Part 1 Wales & West Utilities' engagement programme



### Interviews with customers in vulnerable situations

- One-to-one, face-to-face interviews were chosen in part because they are good at “the detail” – and in particular, at building a comprehensive picture of an individual, their needs and circumstances.
- This form of interview – led by experienced qualitative researchers – was also well suited to understanding the impact of potential and planned ideas and initiatives at a detailed level, since the respondent was able to be given the time and encouragement to carefully consider the implications, limitations, requirements, etc as they applied directly to them. Visiting respondents at home also allowed us to see and understand their circumstances first-hand.
- The format of in-home interviews worked especially well for this audience since it allowed a wide range of individuals with diverse needs and circumstances to be surveyed. Potential barriers such as frailty, lack of mobility and age, etc were largely overcome because we visited respondents in their own homes: the demands placed on them were minimal (far less, for example, than inviting customers to attend focus groups).
- Because we were less reliant on respondents needing to be geographically clustered (as is the case to make focus groups viable), we could be more explicit and granular in defining the nature of the sample to recruit and the specific nature of vulnerabilities to represent.



- A face-to-face methodology was preferable (over telephone or online) for many reasons, not least the quality of insight captured – and in this case, the potential to show respondents stimulus material outlining the services and initiatives under consideration.

- Although, for the reasons explained, a qualitative methodology was required, in order to understand the relative perceived importance of different forms of support across the wider customer group, it was necessary to conduct a significant number of interviews and incorporate a “semi-quantitative” element so that individuals were able to systematically rate the importance and relevance of each initiative and make suggestions about how initiatives could be refined or improved (and this was especially relevant to Phase 2 in which ideas arising from Phase 1 were tested).

### Consultations with care professionals

- During our initial discussions with care professionals it was abundantly clear that in order to secure any of their time, we would need to adopt a highly flexible approach. Although almost unanimously eager to help us, carers’ schedules tended to be hectic and often unpredictable, making it difficult for us to arrange interviews.

- To overcome this, we arranged a mix of interview types in a variety of locations based on one-to-one, paired depths and, in some cases, mini focus groups (with three or four carers in attendance). This flexible approach meant we were able to work around and respond to carers’ shift patterns, giving each of them the freedom to suggest a time and location, sometimes alone and sometimes with one or more colleagues.

- To make the exercise feasible, we selected two main areas – Cardiff and Bristol – which gave us access to the largest and most diverse groups of carers with

experience of caring for the widest range of individuals in vulnerable situations.

- In addition to undertaking an extensive qualitative programme of interviewing with carers, at Phase 1 a relatively small-scale online survey was organised with Care & Repair Caseworkers who similarly had a deep well of experience of working with individuals in vulnerable situations to draw on. The outcomes of this exercise were considered alongside the findings from the customer and carer depth interviews and helped to shape the focus and content of Phase 2.

### Revisiting respondents

- At all three phases of research, new individuals – both from the sample of customers in vulnerable situations and from the carer community – were recruited, in order that the issues could be viewed through fresh eyes, bringing new perspectives to bear. However, it was also decided that a cohort of individuals, representing between one third and one half of both samples, should be re-contacted and interviewed again for two, or in some cases, all three phases of the research programme. This approach proved to be especially rewarding for the individuals involved since they were able to feel a sense that their views were being heard and taken account of as the programme developed. They told us that they felt in a very real sense that they were making a difference.

#### Typical comments:

... I've really enjoyed this; it's great Wales & West Utilities are really listening to what would help people in my situation

... It's been interesting hearing how things have developed after we spoke last time; I feel like my views have been really listened to and are making a difference.

## Outline of some of the programme's key findings

### Key learnings and implications for Wales & West Utilities

As already outlined, our programme of research looking at vulnerability was undertaken across several phases and encompassed two key audiences: customers in vulnerable situations and care professionals. Many of the following issues were initially flagged at the first phase of research but our understanding of each was enhanced and refined as we moved through Phases 2 (testing specific initiatives and support measures) and 3 (setting vulnerability in the context of Wales & West Utilities' business plan for the next five years).

- Many – perhaps most – individuals in potentially vulnerable situations and circumstances **do not know about the provisions in place to support them, and the PSR is largely unfamiliar.**
- On this basis, **a top priority (for Wales & West Utilities and for the sector in general) must be to raise the profile of the PSR significantly** among those who need to know.
- Throughout the programme, **the presence and impact of emotional vulnerability has been striking.** Often, this is linked to other more visible and tangible vulnerabilities and manifests itself as anxiety about the unknown and deviation from normal routines. Anxiety about the prospect of disruption (due to planned or emergency Wales & West Utilities work) is as important an issue to address as vulnerabilities relating to the work itself. In this context, communications ahead of, during (and even after) Wales & West Utilities work are potentially critical.

- Interviews with both audiences have highlighted and subsequently confirmed that another key consideration should be moving away from the tendency of thinking about vulnerability in binary terms (ie those who are vulnerable versus those who are not). It was clear that some individuals and groups within the sample were potentially far more vulnerable than others. With an ageing population, **it would seem sensible for the sector to develop a strategy that prioritises groups within the broader “vulnerable customer” categorisation:** chronic illness and disability, often coupled with old age lead to extreme vulnerability and if these individuals also live alone (especially if a local support network of family or friends is lacking) the degree of vulnerability is significantly heightened.
- Once current measures had been outlined to them, respondents – who were otherwise largely unaware of the measures Wales & West Utilities has in place to support priority customers – were almost unanimously **in agreement that Wales & West Utilities goes to surprising lengths to ensure the most vulnerable are supported.**
- Thus, the insights gained from our samples of customers and carers suggest that the focus for Wales & West Utilities – impacting decisions about how to allocate funding – should be not only on introducing new support initiatives and measures but also on **ensuring that the measures already in place reach the most vulnerable.**
- Indeed, when presented with a range of support measures and initiatives and asked about the relative importance of each, customers and carers made it

clear that **by far the most important area of focus for Wales & West Utilities is raising awareness of the PSR and adopting strategies to increase the proportion of people in vulnerable situations who sign up to it.** Other measures such as providing alternative heating and cooking appliances are also considered to be important, but the overwhelming view of respondents was that unless Wales & West Utilities can identify the potentially vulnerable – through the PSR – the excellent range of support it can offer will simply not reach the right people.

● Although respondents were also asked to comment and rank the importance of initiatives aimed at tackling fuel-poverty specifically or financial hardship more generally, their responses often indicated that they struggled to see how these aims – however worthy they might be – are the responsibility of Wales & West Utilities. Commonly, **respondents suggested that, given limited resources, Wales & West Utilities should focus first of all on supporting those who are most in need in the context of its core operations** (ie planned and unplanned interruptions to the gas supply). **Improving carbon monoxide (CO) awareness and understanding is a slight exception to this principle:** both customer and carer samples rated this aim as amongst the most important for Wales & West Utilities – and suggested that more needs to be done around ensuring that people understand what to do and who to contact if CO alarms sound or if the presence of CO is suspected.



● Respondents were clearly in no position to make decisions about how Wales & West Utilities should allocate the funds available for addressing vulnerability. They had little understanding of the relative cost of the measures being discussed – and even if they did, the decisions to be taken are, by the sample's own admission, too complex for the typical person to objectively consider. However, **the following findings help to offer some perspective on how those in vulnerable situations and carers view relative priorities** (when they were presented with 11 prompted measures and initiatives). Note that sample sizes

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are relatively small since the programme adopted a qualitative approach, so percentages are intended to be indicative only:

- 75% of customers (in vulnerable situations) and 100% of carers categorised increasing PSR sign-up as “essential”.
- 31% of customers and 57% of carers rated increasing PSR sign-up as the most important measure.
- For customers in vulnerable situations, four measures accounted for more than 80% of their first-place rankings (ie the most important): increasing PSR sign-up, providing locking cooker valves, promoting CO awareness and providing alternative heating and cooking appliances.
- For carers, two measures accounted for more than 90% of their first-place rankings: increasing PSR sign-ups and providing alternative heating and cooking appliances.

● **On this basis, raising the profile of the PSR amongst the potentially vulnerable must be seen as a key priority for Wales & West Utilities. However, improving awareness and increasing sign-ups is only part of the equation. Respondents felt strongly that, potentially, the PSR is the key to unlocking solutions to the challenges identified.**

- The information retained in the PSR should be capable of **supporting a much more tailored approach** to addressing vulnerability. For example:
  - Information about communication needs and preferences will help Wales & West Utilities to limit

anxiety amongst many customers in vulnerable situations. This might include information about preferred communication media and channels – and should involve other parties as relevant (eg carers, neighbours, family, etc):

- When and how communications should ideally be organised, including reminders.
- What communications should say (with a focus on reassuring potentially anxious recipients).
- Who communications should be shared with (eg carers, neighbours, family).
- A more comprehensive PSR, containing more nuanced content, is also the key to developing a hierarchy of priority within the population of customers in vulnerable situation.
- Clearer information and understanding of individual circumstances will also help Wales & West Utilities address the impacts of emotional vulnerability, including the way customers in vulnerable situations are notified ahead of any Wales & West Utilities work but also the way in which Wales & West Utilities engages during its operations.
- Raising the PSR's profile is seen as critical. Social media has a role to play, targeting by demographics, as well as friends and family of those in vulnerable situations. **Additional suggestions for bringing the PSR to the attention of those who need to know included:**
  - Leaflets distributed within communities and especially to appropriate locations such as GP's surgeries.

- Mailings – probably most effectively achieved through ‘letters’ rather than flyers, but with careful thought given to what information is included on the envelope.
- Working with other relevant agencies: carers were unanimously in agreement that the PSR could and should be promoted through the carer channel. They felt that Wales & West Utilities should work with their employers to bring this about (and the carers we

spoke to were very keen to introduce information about the PSR to the clients they care for).

- In conclusion, the approach that customers in vulnerable situations and carers would ideally like Wales & West Utilities to adopt is summed up in Figure 1, below. This represents the ‘ideal scenario’ and does not, of course, account for the complexities of the PSR in practice and Wales & West Utilities’ reliance on the information that is shared by suppliers:

Reactions from our sample of customers in vulnerable situations and carers suggest that Wales & West Utilities should use funding to develop a strategic approach to supporting those most in need, broadly based on:



**STRATEGY**

- Focus on **ascertaining individual needs** and offering support based on this...
- ... rather than responding with generic initiatives, which are potentially unnecessary and wasteful
- Requirement for customisable support for the vulnerable – from initial contact to resolution and beyond for peace of mind
- Fundamental need to **prioritise different groups of potentially vulnerable** and tailor offering accordingly

**IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY...**

Urgent need to raise the profile of the PSR

PSR needs to be evolved to contain additional information like: next of kin/ carer details; communication preference; nature of vulnerability and impact on additional services required, while remaining simple to sign up to

Specific comms / channels exclusive to PSR members e.g. vulnerability hotline

## Part 1 Wales & West Utilities' engagement programme

- At Phase 3, much of the focus turned to Wales & West Utilities' draft business plan for the period 2021-2026. The overall structure of the business plan made sense to most and respondents felt that the four headings under which the plan's commitments and promises are grouped have been well chosen.
- The business plan does include a clear focus on supporting the most vulnerable and the promises and commitments that fall under this heading were very well received, by both customer and carer audiences.
- Many respondents were surprised (and pleased) by the number of mentions of supporting the most vulnerable and/or the diverse communities Wales & West Utilities serves.
- Customers and carers were generally consistent in identifying the areas of the business plan that interested them most, the relative importance of each of the four headings and to an extent, the individual promises and commitments encompassed

by each. Aspects outlined under the heading *"Meeting the needs of consumers and network users"* were identified by most as being of greatest interest and relevance to these audiences.

- Customers do not understand the structure of the gas industry. Their relationship and familiarity are with their supplier and they tend to try to make sense of the promises and commitments outlined in the plan in this context. Customers therefore expect a joint approach between Wales & West Utilities and suppliers to communicate the themes contained in the business plan.
- Value for Money is considered a key theme that must be included in the business plan: however, comments from respondents merely highlighted the potential for confusion and/or cynicism (aimed at suppliers) and this needs to be considered in how the promises and commitments are framed.
- For many individuals in vulnerable situations, the focus is on the here and now and, in particular, on everyday challenges such as affording bills and overcoming emotional and physical limitations. For them, promises and commitments about sustainability and the future can seem abstract and out of touch with their reality.
- Many questions were asked about what the terms "vulnerable" or "the most vulnerable" mean. Discussions often developed to highlight a strong and consistent view (which was also encountered at Phase 2) that vulnerability is not an absolute and Wales & West Utilities must focus on the potentially most vulnerable. Usually, this group was believed to include those who live alone – especially if elderly and/or ill or disabled and/or without the support of friends or family.



- There were suggestions from respondents in rural and remote areas that they would like to see assurances that all customers would be treated equally in terms of customer service and support.

For example, some respondents doubted that an organisation such as Wales & West Utilities would be as committed to resolving issues in rural, as opposed to urban communities because of the costs and logistical factors involved (and examples were offered of remote, rural communities feeling overlooked in the context of large business organising service and response).

## How Wales & West Utilities plans are being shaped

The next step was for the research findings to be shared internally, enabling Wales & West Utilities colleague insight to be incorporated.

- An interactive workshop was held and the research results brought to life by a presentation and voice recordings from interviews. A cross-section of Wales & West Utilities colleagues, who in different ways had their own experiences of engaging with vulnerable groups (some working closely with vulnerability support partners), discussed the findings, different scenarios and what actions are needed to improve outcomes for vulnerable customers.

Twenty actions were identified and categorised into short, medium and long-term with 12 outcomes to be delivered within a year and longer-term outcomes identified.

### Typical comments:

...too rural for companies to bother... won't run broadband here

...extra charges to deliver here... businesses and services just not interested in small remote areas. It costs too much to serve...

- Priority areas were acted on immediately and as they emerged. Examples include:

- **Raising awareness of the PSR** – Recognising the value of the register, Wales & West Utilities reached out to the families, friends and carers of the target audience with a successful social media campaign. Around 6,500 homes were referred to the gas suppliers' PSR over a 10-month period, increasing annual figures from less than 4,500 to more than 11,500.

- **Recognising and understanding emotional vulnerability** – Wales & West Utilities developed colleague emotional intelligence training in a range of formats to support wider access with the outcome that participating colleagues are more sensitive to the needs of customers' different physical and mental circumstances and feel more confident to communicate in appropriate ways.

- **Carbon monoxide (CO) safety** – Wales & West Utilities re-committed to providing 6,000 free CO monitors to the most at-risk homes primarily distributed by Wales & West Utilities' partners (Care and Repair Cymru, Fire and Rescue Services, Warm Wales/Warm West) to make sure that they get to the right homes and are provided alongside advice. Wales & West Utilities is also working on collaborative innovation projects with other UK gas networks to develop low-cost solutions for people who are hard of hearing and on national campaigns to raise general awareness, particularly among at-risk groups, eg inclusion in Bounty packs for new mothers and using a 'Safety Seymour' bear to educate primary school children, with new online resources developed during the Covid-19 lockdown.

## Part 2 A guide to the process of researching customers in vulnerable situations

### Describing and defining the target audience

This section discusses the importance of knowing who your audience is and provides guidance about how to describe. It will be relevant if you are currently designing new services and initiatives but it is also relevant if you need to start from the basics when planning research activities for services and support initiatives that are already in place and have an established role and audience.

### Planning audience research

This is the place to start if you have already defined your target audience and wish to start planning your audience research. It addresses the importance of setting clear objectives for audience research activities, and things to consider when planning activities to meet these objectives.

### Collecting audience data

This section provides an overview of the various audience analysis methods available (eg focus groups, surveys). It also offers some information on the pros and cons of conducting the research in different ways to help you decide the best route for your organisation, the audiences you need to research and the services and initiatives that are relevant to the discussion.

### Analysing data

This section focuses on how to analyse and interpret the data that has been collected to address the specific research questions and build up a better understanding of the audience, its needs and circumstances and actual and potential interactions with the services in place or those being considered.

### Putting findings to good use

This section briefly discusses the issues to consider in using the information collected to develop services and initiatives around the needs, circumstances wants and expectations of the audience.



## Describing and defining the target audience

## Planning audience research

## Collecting audience data

## Analysing data

## Putting findings to good use

### The importance of the target audience

Knowing who your audience is and what services or support you intend to offer – or what needs must be met – is vital for any organisation or service provider. This may appear obvious, but it should be an integral part of business planning.

The characteristics of the audience – in this instance customers in vulnerable situations – should influence the development, design and delivery of a service, initiative or support measures. This has direct relevance to ensuring that people in vulnerable situations are not disadvantaged when accessing or interacting with services, support and operations applying across a broader audience or customer profile (and not just individuals who are potentially vulnerable).

Understanding who services and support will be impacting is vital. Trying to be all things to all potential users is problematic. Different groups of users may have incompatible needs and services designed with one form of vulnerability in mind will not necessarily have relevance or appeal to other groups. This was one of the clear messages from our research: vulnerability is not binary.

### The concept of the target audience in service development

Understanding the target audience is critical to the success of any service or initiatives, especially in the case of the type of support appropriate to and required by those in vulnerable situations. Research should focus on finding out the sorts of resources, services and initiatives that have relevance to the target audience,

how they would prefer to access the service, and the delivery mechanisms that could play a role or which might be applicable.

### Defining and describing the target audience

In the case of thinking about people who are potentially vulnerable, a broad definition can be helpful – but only as a starting point. Our research started with defining vulnerability in terms of Ofgem's categories, but we worked with Wales & West Utilities to explore the boundaries of what vulnerability means and who might be considered to be potentially vulnerable.

A good starting point may be to picture a typical, actual audience member. How would you describe this person? The descriptors you use are good starting points for thinking about categories for audience segmentation. This very much applies to thinking about groups or individuals who might be in vulnerable situations or circumstances – but of course, as this report has documented, vulnerability comes in many forms and the different types of 'vulnerable customer' therefore need to be considered in defining the research audience.

A more formal approach to defining audiences would be to develop user profiles or personas as an aid to understanding the needs that those in vulnerable situations are likely to have and the range of services/initiatives that could help to meet these needs. Internal workshops, especially if they can involve operational and customer-facing staff, are a great way to help define and describe an audience, especially in relation to characteristics that can be hard to pin down, such as vulnerability.

## Part 2 A guide to the process of researching customers in vulnerable situations

Describing and defining the target audience

Planning audience research

Collecting audience data

Analysing data

Putting findings to good use

Planning customer or audience research should start with the basic question: What do I want to know about my audience? Considering why the knowledge is needed and how it will be put to use is also important.

Understanding the audience is not an end in itself, but an integral part of developing and maintaining successful service and support. Understanding the drivers for, and uses of, audience analysis work will help to ensure that it is aligned with a wider service vision and objectives and may help to obtain buy-in from senior management.

### Objectives of audience analysis

The key to good audience analysis is setting out clear objectives and planning appropriate research activities to meet these objectives. There is little point in spending time, money and effort collecting data unless it is going to be useful.

### Different approaches to audience analysis

Audience analysis methods can be categorised in different ways, but the distinction between **quantitative** and **qualitative** methods is an important one.

**Quantitative** methods (eg telephone or online surveys) are usually more appropriate when statistically valid conclusions need to be drawn about certain aspects of an audience, such as levels of support for a planned initiative.

**Qualitative** techniques (eg one-to-one depth interviews, focus groups) are often more appropriate for exploring attitudes and motivations in depth, discovering patterns of behaviour and developing a relationship with audience members.

Ethnographic or observational techniques (eg diary studies, accompanied browsing) are increasingly used for studying lifestyles and the way they impact on potential interaction with services, support initiatives, communications, etc.

### Representative data

Samples are said to be representative when the composition of the sample audience – with respect to all relevant attributes – is the same as that of the audience as a whole. In some instances it is important to obtain data from a representative sample of the audience. However, representative data is not always vital, particularly when research is preliminary or exploratory or is a stepping-stone to further investigation.

The kind of information required for a given audience should help determine the methods used, but pragmatic considerations (eg time, money, difficulty of recruiting subjects, resource availability and expertise required) will inevitably play a part. It is common to use a combination of methods in audience analysis projects, for example quantitative and qualitative techniques are often combined.

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Selecting appropriate and effective data collection methods is a complex process, with many factors to consider. Below, we have set out very brief descriptions of a few of the most popular and useful techniques.

### One-to-one in-depth interviews

In-depth interviews conducted on a one-to-one basis, often by telephone or in person. This form of research is useful for understanding the range of needs, barriers, attitudes, motivations, etc which might exist within an audience.

**Pros:** Can be used to collect qualitative or quantitative data, good quality data, more in-depth information can be collected, stimulus material can be shown, if conducted in-home, useful contextualizing information can be gathered.

**Cons:** Relatively expensive, time-consuming.

### Focus groups

Focus groups – which can be arranged in many formats, including online – are based on the premise of a small group of respondents discussing issues and being guided by an experienced facilitator.

**Pros:** Useful for creative discussion and new ideas, relatively short timescales, well-suited to introducing and gaining reactions to stimulus materials.

**Cons:** Demanding of audience time and effort – and this is especially the case when researching vulnerability; relies on geographical respondent clusters; respondents might not be prepared to discuss personally sensitive subjects with others.

### User observation techniques (ethnography)

Ethnography in its truest sense refers to the practice of observing behaviours by being embedded in a given context. With anthropological and sociological roots, this discipline is increasingly used in commercial, public and social research contexts. It includes user-tracking and service-testing.

**Pros:** Potentially this approach helps unlock insights that would remain hidden through traditional survey techniques (qualitative or quantitative).

**Cons:** Generally time-consuming, resource intensive and expensive.

### Quantitative surveys

Quantitative surveys involve using a sample of an audience/population as the basis for producing a statistically reliable picture of the whole. Techniques include online, telephone and postal.

**Pros:** In general, quantitative research can be cost-effective and offers a large proportion of a relevant audience a chance to respond. It requires a low level of commitment from respondents and can provide very quick feedback (especially online).

**Cons:** Vary depending on method but the sample can be self-selecting with no guarantees of response rates; methods should be chosen carefully (ie not all potential respondents will have internet access or will be comfortable using it). Feedback from quantitative surveys lack the depth and detail typically delivered by qualitative techniques.

## Part 2 A guide to the process of researching customers in vulnerable situations

Describing and defining the target audience

Planning audience research

Collecting audience data

Analysing data

Putting findings to good use

Audience data must be analysed appropriately; the techniques used will depend on the type of data and the aims of the research. The data should provide evidence that can be interpreted to draw conclusions relevant to the specific objectives of the research. Full analysis and interpretation of the data should also provide wider insights into the audience and its behaviour and relationship with the service.

### Analysing quantitative data

Quantitative data can be analysed statistically to explore relationships between variables.

Techniques such as regression, correlation, factor and cluster analysis are often used to make sense of data. Analysis needs to bear in mind factors that can affect findings such as poor questionnaire design and issues around a sample being potentially unrepresentative. If the sample is likely to be unrepresentative, it is important to consider the implications for interpretation of the data and caveat the conclusions.

### Making use of qualitative data

Interpreting qualitative data is necessarily a subjective process, so if resources permit, it is sensible to involve more than one person in analysis and presentation of the data. Presentation of qualitative data will

usually attempt to summarise the content and import of the material, and typically include quotations from the material.

Although software is available to help in analysing qualitative data – and it is possible to code or categorise qualitative data so that quantitative techniques can be applied – it is inevitably a specialist and painstaking process and this should be considered before embarking on a programme of research.

### Personas

A persona is an archetype, with the personal traits, lifestyle, aspirations, beliefs, needs and goals, etc typical of a segment of the audience. Personas can help to provide focus for service development.

Although the process of developing a persona can be quite involved, the basic principles can be followed in several ways.

For example, a great way to disseminate and make use of research findings is to hold staff workshops once research has been completed; part of the process could involve small groups developing personas based on the findings and their experiences. This is an effective way of getting staff to think about the range of vulnerabilities likely to be encountered, the challenges they present and, importantly, tangible ways of addressing them.

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Audience research is a tool for developing services and support; however, audience research is an aid to decision-making and not a substitute for it. Evidence from audience research can help inform decisions about meeting customer needs. It can also help inform decisions in relation to priorities, spending and resource allocation as well as many other linked issues such as communications.

### Thinking about the implications

Because distinct audience segments have different requirements, it is important to understand the relationship between them and prioritise allocation of resources appropriately. Audience analysis can provide information about audience segments, their relative size, and how they use, value and access a service, but decisions about resource allocation still depend on service priorities.

Decisions about how to develop and promote the service are still business decisions, not least because use of the service will depend on the quality of the resource, and the success of the communication strategy. Of course, audience analysis should inform both these activities.

### What needs to be done

At the conclusion of an audience research project, when the data has been collected, analysed and interpreted, and conclusions have been drawn, it is important to make sure that the full value of the research is realised. For example:

- The results of the research should be disseminated to stakeholders and other interested parties.
- Everyone who helped with the project should be thanked; this includes staff who helped to carry out the research, participants and anyone else who contributed.
- Consider the implications of the findings for service development and potentially other areas of the organisation.
- Look at the conclusions of the research – were the specific objectives met? What lessons can be learned for future work?
- Plan follow-up and future research.
- Assess the wider implications of the work (eg are there any implications for long-term strategy?)

It may be appropriate to share some of your findings with partners in the same sector, other public sector organisations serving a similar audience, etc.

# Final things to consider when researching those in vulnerable situations...

## DEFINING

Think about potential vulnerability in the broadest sense (circumstantial and transient)

Start broad before moving to narrow; this applies equally to the design phase and to interviewing

## PLANNING

Design a methodology that is as inclusive as possible

Be flexible in approach; rigid methodologies will not work. Adapt to the needs of the individual in front of you

Involve the audience in designing the research: if possible, define who might be vulnerable / how to consult with the help of experienced care professionals

## COLLECTING

Use ethnographic principles to fully understand the reality people in vulnerable situations face

Speak to professionals (ie carers): they offer invaluable insights about vulnerability. They can also unlock new insights from hard-to-reach audiences, such as those with dementia

Involve family members / carers where appropriate to encourage engagement with the research by those in vulnerable situations

Approach research with empathy / respect / understanding: the audience needs to feel understood, and clinical, rigid interviewing styles will not work

Anxiety and its link with emotional vulnerability is key to understanding this audience – all efforts should be made to minimise anything that can exacerbate this

Be prepared to reward respondents, with cash if necessary. This helps ensure they feel valued and also helps make the research more inclusive. Most importantly, a cash reward often secures the co-operation of those who ordinarily might not be the first in line to share their views

## ANALYSING

View the feedback from those in vulnerable situations through the prism of experienced care professionals; in effect, triangulate insights from different audiences to clarify and sharpen

## USING

Share client plans and responses with those who took part: this helps to validate participation

NOTES



Wales & West House, Spooner Close, Celtic Springs, Coedkernew, Newport, NP10 8FZ  
Visit our website: [www.wwutilities.co.uk](http://www.wwutilities.co.uk)  
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