

Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water Vulnerability Conference

2nd July 2024

Post Event Summary



Introduction

On 2nd July, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water launched the latest version of its vulnerability strategy 'Supporting Our Customers – working at the heart of our community' at its annual conference held at the Heritage Park Hotel in Pontypridd. As well as outlining the company's plans for supporting customers that need extra help over the next 5 years, the conference included speakers from organisations that Dŵr Cymru works with closely in delivering these services – Ovo Energy, Oasis (charitable organisation that helps refugees and asylum seekers integrate into communities) and Warm Wales (community interest company tackling fuel poverty). We were also incredibly lucky enough to hear the personal stories of customers who use our services. Listening to the challenges that they face on a daily basis brought to life how difficult it can be to access those services and the things that could be done to make it easier for them. This document summarises the presentations and discussions from the day.

Thank you to the Cabinet Secretary for Culture and Social Justice for opening the conference and to our speakers, panellists, expo stands and interpreters for supporting the event. Finally, thank you to the attendees from our partner organisations for your contribution, questions and enthusiasm on the day.



Over six years ago, we introduced our first vulnerability strategy. A great deal has happened in the years since. Our customers have faced a 1-in-100 year pandemic, the most significant increase in energy, food, fuel and housing costs in a generation and despite, pay awards being at their highest for 30 years, household budgets are under more pressure than ever. It is therefore not surprising that trust in government, politicians and large organisations is at an all-time low. This makes the work that we all do more challenging and increases the importance of us all working together.

In 2018 we set out 5 priority areas - improve the way in which we use the data that we hold, and other organisations hold, to allow customers to access the support they need quickly; growing the reach of our priority services and financial assistance schemes; expanding our partner network; and educating and empowering our staff to recognize and respond to the signs of vulnerability.

We accomplished a lot in the past 6 years and I want to quickly reflect on some of those achievements:

- 150k customers with financial assistance from Welsh Water
- Setting up our mobile Community Hub
- Establishing our Specialist Support Team who provide a case managed service to customers
- 300 Partner organisations across Wales
- 168k customer on the Priority Services Register (11.5% of our customer base)
- Four water resilient community projects delivered.
- Achieving the ISO Consumer Vulnerability standard

Last year, we initiated a review of how we had delivered against this strategy, and to identify priorities for AMP8 (2025 – 30). It was important that we included customer and stakeholder feedback as part of this, so we involved teams across Welsh Water, Welsh Government, politicians, the Consumer Council for Water (CCW), our Independent Challenge Group (ICG) and partners. Additionally, we commissioned research from customers, some of whom receive these services, and some who don't, to find out what was important to them.

The feedback has been incredibly insightful. What is clear is that many people don't self-identify as needing extra help or even realise that utilities providers would classify them as such. Added to this there are barriers to seeking support. These barriers can be emotional – the shame someone feels by their situation and embarrassment of speaking to someone about it, or practical – the difficulty in navigating the application process or recognising that support is available.

The research also told us that in this difficult economic climate, this group of customers consider themselves to be “just about managing.” They consider water bills to be a high priority along with rent/mortgage, gas, electricity, and council tax. However, it is the lowest priority of these key expenses since most don't believe DCWW would cut them off if they couldn't pay. They are afraid of more severe repercussions if they were default on their other bills. Many customers don't interact with DCWW on regular basis and most evaluate their experience based on the transactional interactions (e.g., paying bills, moving house etc). For those who have had interactions with DCWW, experiences have been mixed. Generally, the customer service representatives are seen as helpful and polite. However, some improvements can be made when it comes to website navigation, incident communications and support.

Despite the low awareness of PSR and the financial support that we offer, when people become aware of what we can offer, they do react positively, suggesting an appetite for this audience to learn more about the services. Our teams are working hard to grow the awareness of the support we offer, but we still have more that we can do.

All of this feedback has formed the basis of our plans for AMP8. The priority areas are largely unchanged. We will continue to focus in the areas of Data, Accessible Services, Training & Awareness and Community & Partnerships and the key areas of activity are outlined below.

- Data
 - Data sharing for priority services AND financial assistance
 - Information about needs of underrepresented groups
 - Water usage information (Smart Metering)

- Accessible support designed around customer need.
 - Social tariffs and financial assistance schemes
 - Priority services and incident response
 - Annual customer research and satisfaction surveys

- Training & Awareness
 - Annual training and competency assessments for our people
 - Monthly Teach Talks for front line agents
 - Training for partners

- Community and partnership
 - Community partnership clusters
 - Annual collaboration event
 - Water Resilient Community projects

We have learnt a great deal since 2018 and we know how important our financial assistance and priority services schemes are to customers who need extra help. We couldn't do this without the incredible support of our partners, and I look forward to continuing to work closely with you all in delivering meaningful outcomes for customers.



Peter O’Hanlon, Head of Vulnerable Customer Support and Digital, Welsh Water:

Peter introduced the vulnerability strategy for 2025-2030 “Supporting Our Customers”. Peter spoke about how this is the most accessible conference to date, with the inclusion of sign language support and Welsh language translation service.

Lesley Griffiths MS: Cabinet Secretary for Culture and Social Justice:

The conference began with the Cabinet Secretary discussing how the cost-of-living crisis, which is driving more people into poverty, is affecting the people of Wales more than ever before.

The Cabinet Secretary gave an overview of the work that Welsh Water have completed over the last 12 months. Working closely in line with the Welsh Government’s social practice guidance to support the most vulnerable customers in Wales. Supporting customers daily with the burden of bills.

She highlighted the fact that we currently have 169K customers registered on PSR, the importance of getting customers on the register and providing them the support when they need it the most. Lesley also talked about the great effort that Welsh Water have done to support over 130K customer who receive some form of social tariff or support from us.

The Cabinet Secretary ended her speech talking about how important it is during this collaboration event to build strong working relationships to support the people of Wales.

Steven Donovan, OVO Energy

At OVO, our starting point is “How do we support our customers” – This requires the use of data. Data is essential for everything. We need to use rich data to comprehend what our customers want and need. Stats are valuable, but we also need to turn that data into a story and make it more vivid using people, bringing it to life. The data teams gave me a “present” in the form of a visual regional map that was rich in data and key stats, that would show areas of opportunity within the UK that we served.

We would work with main charity and local authority partners to provide the right support in the right place.

We used the data science teams to review the data characteristics and answer the question, “vulnerable to what, and what do we do differently”.

“Remember not all PSR customers are vulnerable at the same level at the same time.”

Looking at ways we can enhance the customer experience and reduce the risk of detriment to the customer. We created OVO PSR + with 4 key vulnerabilities, medical equipment, health conditions, mind & mental health conditions and communication needs. We trial this focus with a select group of agents with the long-term plan to grow wider in the business. With the progress so far.

- 14% Uplift in Advisor confidence dealing with vulnerable customers.
- 7% improvement in CSAT
- 18% increase in FCR
- Scaled the PSR + to over 350+ agents in 18 months.

Steven talked about the community work that has been trailed in the Newport area. This area was picked due to the data that we held, serving about 8k in customer across the NP20 post code, PSR level of 33% and EPC rating of <C 65%. It all started with the OVO pop up supporting over 40 families in the one day,

talking to all types of people about the support on offer. Working with other local support groups to create a one stop shop for advice and support.

Having a long-term physical presence in the community and leaving a lasting impression was the goal of this trial. In person help and reaching some of the most vulnerable customers within the community. The Newport hub was a success and they have now installed solar panels on the community centre that supported them during the pop up. The success of the trial in Newport has led to 4 total pop up centres, 1 full time OVO support hub with solar panels, 350 families supported with things like electric blankets and energy saving advice and products and an estimated energy saving cost of almost £126k

Steven gave an overview about sharing data safely and OVO has started to use Support Hub with Experian <https://www.experian.co.uk/business-products/support-hub>. Its about getting the customers to tell us what they need not the circumstances for it. This allows the customer to be more open with the kind of support they need and feel like they don't have to explain everything to multiple organisations. OVO is the firstly utility to use this kind of service and so far this has been at a benefit to its outgoing support for vulnerable customers.

Susie Ventriss-Field, Oasis

Oasis aims to provide accessible support for people who are seeking sanctuary. They help people who are asylum seekers and refugees in Wales. Offering a "Warm Welsh Welcome". They run drop-in centres in Splott, Cardiff that offer a huge range of support within mental health, lunch and day trips and a safe social space for users experiencing the same journey. Oasis has a case worker in house who works with various key organisations like DCWW and government agencies, assisting users with the paperwork and support for the asylum process. Susie explained the obstacles that they encounter every day with some of the following being the biggest that their users face during the process. Language barrier, financial literacy, complex processes, lack of awareness of available support and the lack of trust in big organisations due to bad experiences and bureaucracy.

Susie spoke highly of their experience with DCWW, "We have worked closely with the reach team in Welsh Water to support our users with direct support to avoid unnecessary calls" Oasis have also received training from our reach team and held several awareness sessions with clients.

Susie talked about what doesn't work and what can cause poor experiences for vulnerable customers that they support.

- Rigid processes
- Lack of follow up – (Callbacks).
- Poor communication
- Cultural insensitivity

Steps to success for accessible services

- Community engagement
- Simple processes
- Training and support
- Holistic approach
- Proactive outreach
- Offering translation

There is still a lot of uncertainty with the current climate and the political changes in the coming weeks, what the future will hold, but remaining positive and pushing through with the main focus of supporting the most vulnerable is key to providing that accessible service.

Sharon Martin – Parkinson’s Advocate

Sharon was 39 years old when she was diagnosed with Parkinson’s. Sharon noticed she was getting a tick in her shoulder and went to the doctor for a routine visit. After the visit the doctor called and over phone informed Sharon that she had Parkinson’s. She had nowhere to turn to and was left as a single mum who turned to drink. Sharon spoke about the difficult journey she has taken over the last 7 years to get her where she is today.

Speaking about life with Parkinson’s, Sharon said: “Sometimes we look different and shake, but we are still people. People do say stuff to us – saying that we are drunk is quite common. I once went to hospital for an appointment at 8am and someone said I was drunk.

"But you do develop thick skin after a while.

Sharon spoke highly of her family and friends that got her through the difficult time and they become her support network. Stating without her sister, she wouldn’t be the person she is today. After moving back to Wales from Devon, Sharon spotted a Parkinson’s advert in a local shop and meet Ray, a gentleman local to her who also suffered with the disease. Sharon wanted to pay respect to Ray who this year lost his battle with Parkinson’s but who she credits her focus and positivity on now.

Sharon set up the first Parkinson’s cafes in the Rhondda, aimed at bringing people together.

She has found it a real help to talk to other people who have the condition – something she didn’t have for the first five years after being diagnosed.

She added: “There are several cafes across the valleys & Merthyr.

“We use church halls, community centres, pubs – wherever we can get that is free.

“We meet once a month, and it’s all about people with Parkinson’s meeting up, and their carers and friends.

The conference video aimed to show how this disease can cripple people and how vital it is to take the right medication on time.

Sharon wanted to commend the work that DCWW have done for her. She recently spoke to the contact centre and a young CSA called Kyle who was fantastic, extremely supportive, and knowledgeable around the support that she could get from DCWW.

Jo Seymour, Warm Wales

Warm Wales is about tackling fuel poverty in South- West England and Wales. They were set up in 2004 and are a community interest company. Nonprofit organisation that will reinvest into the local communities.

- 1 in 4 (28%) adults are worried about the cost-of-living crisis.
- 1 in 5 (23%) adults felt that they can't cope during the cost-of-living crisis.

The aim of Warm Wales is to reduce fuel poverty and empower people to get the right support, make the right decisions and become more resilient. The benefits of this are that their customers are more likely to pay bills and have the ability to heat their home. Currently 43% of adults said their financial situation is affecting their mental wellbeing.

The energy crisis has played a huge part in people struggling to heat their homes during the colder months. Up to 45% (614k) of households could end up in fuel poverty.

Some of the main themes of work in the community are around energy efficiency and affordable warmth. Energy advice and fuel debt support. Money maximization, water support and warm home discount.

Our model of support can deliver change within the community. Bringing together energy advice, case work support, education, and behaviour change. Improving wellbeing by tackling the root causes – Linking health, well-being, and early intervention.

Working with partners is key to supporting our mission. Since January 2024 Warm Wales has helped 12000 households to date and saved over £2.4M with the top interventions being fuel top up and water support advice. The Cymuned fund from DCWW has been instrumental in supporting the middle earners and proving them that payment break to allow them to get back on track financially.

Having a strong working partnership is key and allowing each side to break away if its not supportive to both sides is also important. When something is not working its okay to say and either makes changes or end the partnership to focus on others.



Customer Panel was held with 4 key customers of DCWW and hosted by Samantha James MD - Rachel, Ken, Bianca, and Carys.

Question 1 – What is it like dealing with companies, councils, and other utility providers as a vulnerable customer?

Rachel talked about the struggle when in hospital due to lack of signal and internet service to call or use their digital sites. Also, the priority at the time is not calling around companies and businesses, its about your health and seeking the correct support you need. It's also about finding the time, with lack of time things get pushed back and some companies are closed and not accessible at the time you need them. This was echoed by Bianca who stated the wait times are also off putting, when trying to speak to companies for support you end up having to wait along time on the phone and end up giving up. Carys mentioned about finding accessible comms, for people with sight loss many businesses simply say, "Is there anyone to read it for you?" Which doesn't provide a great level of support to people with sight problems that may not have the support network around them. Having websites that support customers with sight problems is also a huge issue across companies with lack of accessible functions can be off putting to many customers with a vulnerability or disability. Ken talked about the contact number being hidden, making it harder to speak to actual people and feeling like you're being forced to use the digital platform which isn't always great when you need the support the most.

Question 2 – What is a good customer journey to you?

Ken's view is about having well trained people that can relate and support customers with all kinds of needs. Carys talked about not putting people into boxes and asking the right questions "What do you need?" and "How can I support you?" Bianca said time is the biggest factor for her when having a good journey. When speaking to companies she felt as though things are rushed and the importance is not the customer but how they can get off the call quickly. Having quality time where things are explained and talked over always fills her with confidence and she feels like she has been listened to. Rachel mentioned about a holistic approach, signposting to other companies, and working together to not just provide the right outcome for the customer with that business but for the customer.

Question 3 – When you can't find information, where do you go?

Bianca mentioned that she would rely on her friends and her network of mum friends, as they often share useful information and experiences in groups. Carys and Ken discussed Charities, using CAB and ensuring that they get the right advice. Rachel said how convenient it is to use online sources for information, but also how important it is to use trusted sources like a charity or local community hub that are reliable.

Question 4 – What are your feelings on data being shared?

Everyone agreed that sharing data is important and a powerful tool to support the most vulnerable customers. They all agreed that the customer needs to be informed that information is shared and who with and the benefit of what is being shared first. Following GDPR guidelines. Ken stated he wouldn't want his data to be shared if this would or could affect his credit rating. He believes that the sharing of data when done correctly for the setting it requires, so the sharing of health data to trusted sources to make sure he gets the right level of support and benefits is important but doesn't want that data shared to impact him financial with companies. Rachel said a "Tell once" service would be great as this would cut out having to contact multiple companies or figure out who is sharing data. Carys noted that sharing data can also have

its downside, with scams on the rise, more and more people are falling victim to, its important that we have the trust in the customer that what we share is safe, secure and would not fall victim to any data breach.

Guided Expo



Tracey Jones, Promotions Manager at DCWW.

Sion Griffiths, Community and Education Manager at DCWW.

Annie Lamb, Team Leader, Water Services at DCWW.

Jo Seymour, Warm Wales

Carys Groves, Sight Life

Steven Donovan, Ovo Energy

Deb Gilbert, Energy Savings Trust

Alison Nunnick/Suzanne Lewis, Alzheimer's Society

Jack Bentley, Care & Repair

Finlay Jones, Cwm Taf Health Board



Appendix A: Agenda

09:30 Arrival and refreshments
10:00 Welcome and housekeeping, Pete O'Hanlon, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water
10:05 Lesley Griffiths MS: Cabinet Secretary for Culture and Social Justice
10:15 Sam James, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water
10:45 Steven Donovan, Ovo Energy
11:10 Susie Ventris-Field, Oasis
11:35 Break
11:50 Sharon Martin, Parkinson's Advocate
12:15 Jo Seymour, Warm Wales
12:40 Lunch
13:30 Customer voice panel
14:00 Group Exercise: Feedback on Dŵr Cymru's vulnerability strategy
14:45 Closing remarks, Sam James, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water
15:00 Close

Appendix B: Speaker Bios

Lesley Griffiths MS: Cabinet Secretary for Culture and Social Justice

Lesley Griffiths was brought up in Northeast Wales and has lived and worked in Wrexham all her adult life. She has 2 daughters and has served as a school governor and community councillor. She worked at the Wrexham Maelor Hospital for 20 years. Prior to her election she worked as constituency assistant to Ian Lucas, MP. As a strong supporter of devolution for Wales, she played an active role in the 1997 'Yes for Wales' campaign.

Lesley was first elected to the National Assembly for Wales in May 2007. In December 2009, she was appointed Deputy Minister for Science, Innovation and Skills. Following re-election to the National Assembly for Wales in May 2011, Lesley was appointed Minister for Health and Social Services. In March 2013, she was appointed Minister for Local Government and Government Business and in September 2014, she was appointed Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty. In May 2016, following re-election, she was appointed Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs and held that role until 21 March 2024, when she was appointed Cabinet Secretary for Culture and Social Justice.

Outside of politics, her main hobbies are watching Wrexham Football Club, music and walking. Lesley is formerly an elected director of the Wrexham Supporters Trust.

Steven Donovan, OVO Energy

Steve is the TCF and Consumer Vulnerability Lead at OVO Energy. He is a specialist in customer experience and strategy, with a particular focus on inclusive design and supporting customers in vulnerable circumstances. Steve lives with his family in the Newport region and enjoys all aspects of engaging with the communities in Wales.

Susie Ventris-Field, Oasis

Susie is currently the Chief Executive of the Welsh Centre for International Affairs. She has previously worked on gender equality in Wales and on education in Kenya, South Korea and Eritrea. Susie is passionate about helping Wales become a Nation of Sanctuary and has many personal relationships with those who have sought asylum and experienced the challenges and the joys of the transition to making Wales home.

Sharon Martin, Parkinson's Advocate

Sharon Martin, 48, from Tylorstown in Rhondda, Wales, was diagnosed with Parkinson's at 39. Since diagnosis, Sharon has become a keen campaigner, sharing her story to help decision makers better understand what it's like to live with Parkinson's.

Jo Seymour, Warm Wales – Director of Partnerships and development

Joanna's role combines project management, operational delivery, staff management, identifying and cultivating new partnerships and leading on the development of new project opportunities. Joanna joined Warm Wales as Project Manager in November 2017 and is a qualified Environmental Health Practitioner.

Appendix C: List of attendees

Your name	Your organisation
Carys Groves	Sight Life
Louise Siegle	Trussell Trust
Tim Vanstone	Scope
Laura Talbot	Kidney Care UK
Karen Taylor	Citizens Advice RCT
Deena Abawi	Oasis
Lynne Thomas	Splott Community Volunteers
Martin Griffiths	British Deaf Association
Rhian Morris	DCWW
Steve Donovan	OVO
Stephen Sullivan (Sully)	Adferiad
Beth Lowden	Blind Veterans UK
Natalie Clark	Cardiff and vale credit union
Katherine Collins	Blind Veterans UK
Lawrence Davies	Money and Pensions Service
Peter Davies	Independent Challenge Group
Mike Freeman	Riverside Advice
Claire Lammiman	Cardiff & Vale Credit Union
Laurie Cuthbert	Kidney Care UK
Kerstin Nott	Save the Children Cymru
Anna Humphrey	DCWW
Stephanie Grimshaw	Welsh Women's Aid
Sharon Martin	Parkinson's
Davinia Bailey	The Salvation Army
Alison Brown	Shelter Cymru
Rhian Bale	Mind in Gwent
Kate Jones	Welsh Women's Aid
Helen Painting	Alzheimer's Society Cymru
Bernadette Kelly	Mind in Gwent
Jaime Devine	Mind in Gwent
Helen Hancock	Bipolar UK

Sharon Derrick	Wales Council for Deaf People
Caroline Richardson	Cardiff & Vale Credit Union
Sally Hunt	Welsh Government
Ann Alderman	DWP/Jobcentre Plus
Katie Wood	Hafren Dyfrdwy
Deborah Gilbert	Energy Saving Trust
Susie Ventris-Field	Oasis
Gareth Thomas	National Energy Action
Solitaire Pritchard	Pobl
Gareth Evans	Citizens Advice Rhondda Cynon Taff
Lindsey Kearton	Citizens Advice Cymru
Adam Howells	Monmouthshire County Council
Rachel Spencer	Tenovus Cancer Care
Jo Thomas	Caerphilly CBC
Sherell McLaughlan	Caerphilly CBC
Jo Seymour	Warm Wales
Elliot Jones	Warm Wales
Jack Bennett	Citizens Advice Merthyr Tydfil
Kate Jones	Welsh Women's Aid
Richard Richards	Ara Recovery for All
Rhiannon McHugh	ASD Rainbows
Zainab Nur	Salvation Army
Christine Webb	The Icarus Charity
Joanne Harrison	Porth Jobcentre
Maisie Chatfield	National Energy Action
Victoria Hiscocks	Pobl Group
Katherine Evans	Specialist Support Advisor - Welsh Water
Bianca Lepore	Customer
Jonathan Cosson	Warm Wales
natalie clark	Cardiff and vale credit union
Louise Siegle	Trussell Trust
Samantha Howells	DWP
Helen Roach	Warm Wales
Alison Nunnick & Suzanne Lewis	Alzheimer's Society
Stephen Sullivan	Adferiad
Maria Saleemi	Department for work and pensions
Lawrence Davies	Money and Pensions Service
AMPARIN BELMONTE	DWP JOB CENTRE PLUS NEWPORT CHARLES STREET, NP20 1JR
Finlay Jones	Cwm Taf health Board
Pete O'Hanlon	Dwr Cymru
Samantha James	Dwr Cymru
Sarah Sebburn	Dwr Cymru

Tracey Jones

Dwr Cymru

Emily Burrows

Dwr Cymru

Jon Garbutt

Dwr Cymru

Rebecca Price

Dwr Cymru

Ross Forbes

Dwr Cymru

Claire Anderson

Sign Interpreter

Clare Cryer

Sign Interpreter

Appendix D: Pictures throughout the day









