

Vulnerable Customer Qualitative Research Report

Ipsos B&A in Partnership with
SSE Airtricity

February 2026



Executive Summary

The Research

In late 2025, SSE Airtricity commissioned Ipsos B&A to conduct qualitative research to understand the experiences and needs of vulnerable customers situated in Northern Ireland. Fifteen in-depth telephone interviews were conducted between November 2025 and January 2026 with vulnerable customers across electricity, gas, and dual fuel services, primarily comprising pensionable age customers and those with additional health or mobility challenges.

Key Takeaways

- **Importance of independence:** Vulnerable customers are conscious that their circumstances may well change in the coming years, and needs are likely to evolve. Regardless of level of vulnerability, customers deeply value their independence, and fear future (or further) loss of such. Service providers that help vulnerable customers maintain their autonomy through accommodations are appreciated.
- **Customers feel supported and protected:** When engaged, vulnerable customers feel genuinely looked after. The supports offer reassurance, peace of mind, and some comfort in the knowledge that potential future needs can be catered for.
- **Service provision is well-rounded:** The infrastructure in place for vulnerable customers is comprehensive, but awareness of the full breadth of services offered is low. For some, awareness of their own status as vulnerable or priority services is patchy, and can depend on specific circumstances and previous engagement with services on offer.
- **Communication:** For vulnerable customers, interactions are often as important as service provision, with the potential to provide peace of mind and reassurance, or conversely, to create or exacerbate issues or concerns. This feeds into preferences for phone support over other channels.
- **Pain points:** Service delivery challenges stem primarily from outsourced elements rather than SSE Airtricity directly. Extended delays for meter relocations can cause significant stress, but could be substantially mitigated through better collaboration between SSE and the outsourced partners, expectation management, clarity on escalation, and clearer communication about processes and timelines.



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1 Background and Research Approach

1.1 Objectives of the research

This research was commissioned to better understand the experiences of vulnerable customers and covered the SSE Airtricity Northern Ireland Electric business and its Customer Care Register, as well as the SSE Airtricity Gas business and its Energy Care Scheme for vulnerable customers.

The study aimed to gain insights into customer needs, evaluate satisfaction with current services, and identify opportunities to enhance support provision and communication for this important customer segment.

Terminology

Please note that throughout this report, 'Vulnerable Customer Register' refers to the registers maintained for both the Northern Ireland Gas Energy Care Scheme and the Northern Ireland Electricity Customer Care Register. Both the SSE Airtricity Energy Care Scheme (Gas) and Customer Care Register (Electric) provide vulnerable customers with a range of additional services suitable to their individual circumstances.

1.2 Research methodology

The qualitative research approach comprised 15 in-depth telephone interviews with vulnerable customers conducted between October 2025 and January 2026. Telephone interviews were selected as the most appropriate and accessible method for extended discussions with this customer group.

Discussions ranged from 45-60 minutes, and explored participants' daily lives and circumstances, the role of energy in the home and in maintaining their wellbeing, their relationship with SSE Airtricity, preferences around communication, and experiences with vulnerable customer services. The research also examined customer awareness of their registration and available support services, whilst identifying both current and future support needs.

1.3 Sample Profile

All participants were existing SSE Airtricity customers selected from the Vulnerable Customer Registers.

To ensure perspectives across all service types were captured, the research included five electricity customers, five gas customers, and five dual fuel customers.

The majority of participants were of pensionable age, with several experiencing additional vulnerabilities including mobility restrictions and health-related challenges.

The sample represented varying lengths of customer relationship with SSE Airtricity, from recent joiners to those with long-standing accounts.

A proportion of participants had previous experience engaging with specific Vulnerable Customer support services.

2 Customer Context

2.1 Life stage and types of issues represented

The research sample included individuals with a range of different needs and in different situations. There was a focus on customers of pensionable age, and multiple participants met additional qualifying criteria for the Vulnerable Customer Register that impact mobility, daily activities and tasks, and overall quality of life, including:

- Physical disabilities affecting mobility and independence
- Chronic pain conditions, including joint and bone diseases
- Spinal issues impacting mobility and comfort
- Visual impairment
- Neurological conditions
- Neurodevelopmental conditions
- Chronic fatigue
- Respiratory and cardiovascular conditions

The severity and impact of these circumstances varied considerably across the sample. Whilst some of the sample maintained relative independence in their daily routines and were not facing difficulty navigating day to day life (i.e. pensionable age only), several participants were balancing multiple issues and conditions requiring significant adaption.

For these customers, daily life often involves managing regular medical appointments and procedures, persistent pain or discomfort, complex medication regimens, and dependence on essential in-home medical equipment including electric furniture or beds and oxygen therapy equipment. Some are living in bungalows or have made modifications to their homes to remain fully or mostly downstairs.

Many in the sample had recently experienced major life transitions in recent years (bereavement, divorce, partners entering full-time care facilities, deteriorating health, early retirement on medical grounds, or reduced working capacity), with many participants now living alone, adding an additional layer of vulnerability to their circumstances.

The research identified distinct perspectives on vulnerability and support needs;

- **Customers of pensionable age without additional health conditions** typically do not identify as vulnerable customers. For this group, the Vulnerable Customer Register represents a safety net they appreciate having available should their circumstances change, rather than an immediate necessity. They tend to view their registration as a natural entitlement that accompanies reaching pensionable age, similar to other age-related benefits such as free travel passes or winter fuel payments. They exercise their eligibility for these services as a prudent step, recognising it as a benefit they qualify for, rather than registering from a position of perceived vulnerability or immediate need. Some in this cohort may even be unaware of their registration.
- **Customers managing health or mobility challenges** clearly identify with their vulnerable status and face immediate, daily challenges that require accommodation. For these customers, vulnerable customer services are essential rather than precautionary, and they view energy providers as having a fundamental duty of care to ensure appropriate provisions are in place for customers facing significant challenges.

2.2 Daily life and priorities

Regardless of severity of conditions or levels of vulnerability, core priorities emerged as fundamental to maintaining quality of life; staying mentally and physically engaged through meaningful activities, preserving connections with family and social networks, and most critically, maintaining personal independence. This emerged as the primary concern for all participants. Within the constraints of their individual circumstances and conditions, every participant demonstrated a strong determination to preserve their autonomy and self-sufficiency to the greatest extent possible. This drive for independence shapes daily decisions and influences how customers engage with support services – accepting help where necessary while striving to maintain control over their lives.

For those experiencing more significant vulnerabilities, the research revealed an ongoing tension between the desire for independence and the practical reality of increasing support needs. Many participants have experienced a deterioration of their ability to manage independently and now rely on informal support networks comprising family members, friends, and neighbours. These support systems have become essential for managing daily activities that may previously have been taken for granted, including:

- Shopping and errands
- Meal preparation
- Personal care tasks such as dressing
- Mobility assistance, including getting in and out of bed
- Managing heavy lifting or physical tasks
- Transportation to medical appointments
- Household maintenance, laundry, and cleaning

Visual impairment can come with additional unique challenges, and the shift towards digital-first services, while beneficial for many, risks creating additional barriers for those whose conditions make technology adoption challenging.

3 Role of Energy

3.1 Attitudes towards energy

Home-centred living has become the norm for most participants, whether due to retirement, mobility restrictions, or health limitations. They have largely adapted their daily routines to accommodate extended periods at home, with most time spent in key living spaces – primarily kitchens, living rooms, and bedrooms. This concentration of daily life within the home environment underscores the critical importance of reliable energy supply for this customer group, as their wellbeing depends heavily on maintaining a comfortable, functional home environment.

A reliable energy supply is crucial for those with additional needs in terms of heating. Many participants described experiencing heightened sensitivity to cold temperatures, with exposure causing significant pain, restricting movement, and exacerbating existing conditions. Contributing factors include low immune systems, increased susceptibility to temperature changes, and chronic pain conditions that intensify in cold environments.

Energy consumption patterns show clear seasonal variation, with winter months bringing substantially increased usage due to more time spent in the house, less daylight hours, and increased heating needs. Several participants reported keeping heating on continuously throughout winter months as a necessity. Living arrangements influence energy management approaches, as several of those living alone reported greater control over their energy usage, able to tailor consumption precisely to their individual needs. Some noted this represented a reduction from previous household consumption levels when partners or families were present, though their current usage remains essential rather than discretionary.

Heating arrangements varied across the sample, with participants using gas central heating, electric heating, oil systems, and supplementary sources including fires and portable electric heaters. Several participants maintained emergency provisions including camping stoves and portable heaters, demonstrating awareness of their vulnerability to supply disruptions.

Beyond heating, typical energy usage encompassed essential daily activities: cooking, internet connectivity, laundry, television, and device charging. However, for some participants, electricity powers critical support equipment including adjustable beds, mobility furniture, and essential medical devices.

3.2 Energy-related concerns

Cost, rather than supply reliability, dominates customer concerns. Energy bills are treated as a financial priority, with participants describing energy costs as 'one of the first things' budgeted for each month. While most participants expressed confidence in supply reliability and take it for granted, viewing disruptions as rare occurrences, the rising financial burden of energy costs is a source of worry.

Those that cannot afford breaks in supply due to heating needs or critical machinery or equipment drew reassurance from SSE's commitment to prioritising vulnerable customers during outages. Awareness of Vulnerable Customer Register provisions effectively addresses supply security concerns for the most vulnerable.

The research revealed a difficult balance between comfort needs and cost consciousness. While participants recognised heating as essential for their comfort and wellbeing, several described adopting coping strategies at times to manage costs. These ranged from selective heating of rooms to practices to reverting to 'hoodie on' as a first step before activating heating. Most spend considerable time at home with limited ability to reduce what they view as essential usage. Even those who considered themselves relatively comfortable financially expressed sensitivity to rising energy costs and found themselves being more selective with usage than they would prefer.

3.3 Billing and payment

Payment preferences were consistently driven by the need for predictability and control, with all participants expressing strong aversion to unexpected high bills. This concern shaped their choice of payment methods and billing arrangements.

Payment methods varied across the sample, with many of the most vulnerable customers using prepayment meters – a choice that, whilst potentially more expensive, provides immediate control and eliminates bill shock. Others opted for direct debit arrangements across electricity and gas services, valuing the ability to spread costs evenly throughout the year despite seasonal usage variations.

Most participants found current billing relatively straightforward to understand, though some gas customers reported difficulties determining credit balances. Once reassured that bills remain stable without dramatic spikes, most participants did not closely monitor detailed usage metrics, tending instead to focus on general consciousness about energy consumption.

Receptiveness to energy-saving guidance proved limited, largely because participants viewed their current consumption as already pared to essential needs. Customers do not like to think of themselves as being wasteful, and this can frame responsiveness to the idea of energy saving tips in the home. Those who had already invested in efficiency measures – LED lighting, solar panels, or improved insulation – felt they had ticked the obvious boxes and questioned what additional savings could realistically be achieved beyond reducing usage.

4 Relationships With SSE Airtricity

The research included customers with varied tenure lengths, though long-standing relationships were more prevalent within the sample. Participants initially chose SSE Airtricity for diverse reasons, including competitive rates at the time of sign-up, inherited accounts from previous property occupants, dissatisfaction with previous providers, and in some cases – particularly for gas customers – limited alternative options in their area.

The nature of the customer-provider relationship varies significantly based on individual support needs and frequency of interaction. Customers who do not perceive themselves as vulnerable typically view SSE Airtricity as ‘just another service provider’ – one they are satisfied with but rarely need to contact. For these customers, limited interaction is seen positively; the absence of problems requiring contact indicates the service is functioning well. In contrast, customers managing significant health or mobility challenges often develop a more meaningful relationship with SSE Airtricity. For this group, the provider represents more than a utility company – it offers reassurance and peace of mind through the availability of vulnerable customer services and responsive support when needed.

4.1 Satisfaction with SSE Airtricity

Across the sample, all participants spoke positively of their relationships with SSE Airtricity. Many have experienced reliable service without significant disruptions and remain satisfied with their choice of provider, and those with minimal direct contact reported being content with the service received. Additional positive feedback highlighted the emergency helpline service and the availability of emergency credit facilities, which provided crucial support during critical moments.

Customer service quality emerged as the primary driver of satisfaction. Participants who had more frequent contact due to their vulnerability needs reported particularly positive experiences. Staff interactions received consistent praise across multiple dimensions:

- Reasonable waiting times and accessibility of phone support
- Courteous, empathetic, and understanding staff attitudes
- Professional, knowledgeable representatives capable of addressing queries effectively
- Efficient issue resolution, both for general queries and Vulnerable Customer Register-specific services

Participants felt that SSE Airtricity staff are well-trained in interpersonal skills and demonstrate appropriate sensitivity when engaging with vulnerable customers.

Any past issues experienced tend to be viewed in isolation rather than as systemic failings. Successful issue resolution reinforced positive perceptions, with customers expressing appreciation even when resolution processes proved lengthy or initially caused concern. Satisfaction with problem-solving was based both on the quality of interactions with customer support and complaints departments, and the speed of practical interventions such as meter repairs. The complaints department received particular recognition for their handling of escalated issues, with several participants praising individual staff members who managed their cases.

While a minority of participants reported longer wait times when contacting customer support, this was not viewed as significantly worse than experiences with other service providers. Rather than generating serious frustration, such delays were generally accepted as minor inconveniences inherent to dealing with large organisations. Other isolated points of frustration include 'unnecessary' communication from SSE – for example a customer with an inactive night storage heater being contacted sporadically about it needing to be removed, and 'going around in circles' between NIE and SSE.

4.2 Loyalty and switching

Switching providers is not a priority for most vulnerable customers, who typically value stability, continuity, and peace of mind over potential marginal savings. The research revealed a consistently loyal customer base, though the underlying motivations for this loyalty varied considerably. For many, loyalty to SSE Airtricity could be characterised as passive, driven by:

- Limited alternatives, particularly for gas customers who reported few viable options in their areas
- Inertia, with the perceived hassle of switching outweighing potential benefits
- Change resistance, with some participants citing neurodevelopmental conditions that make transitions particularly challenging
- Satisfaction with the status quo, where positive experiences to date remove any urgency to explore alternatives

Other participants demonstrated more active loyalty, particularly those with immediate support needs who highly value their vulnerable customer status and the additional services this provides. These customers expressed strong appreciation for their current arrangements and showed no interest in risking disruption to established support systems.

Perceptions of the switching process itself were varied. While some viewed provider changes as straightforward, others anticipated significant hassle. Participants noted the difficulty of making genuine comparisons between providers given the complexity of sign-up offers, credit arrangements, and varying rate structures. Previous switching experience was more common for electricity than gas services. Those open to switching were primarily motivated by sign-up bonuses and demonstrably lower rates. Conversely, loyalty rewards such as additional credit or top-ups were valued by existing customers and can reinforce decisions to remain.

Ultimately, participants indicated they face more pressing daily challenges than pursuing marginal energy savings. Given their broad satisfaction with SSE Airtricity and the absence of compelling reasons to change, the effort required to switch providers was not considered worthwhile unless significant cost savings could be guaranteed. This perspective was particularly pronounced among those managing health conditions or mobility challenges, for whom maintaining stable, reliable support arrangements took clear precedence over potential financial optimisation.

5 Communication Preferences

Openness to communication channels outside of phone calls depends on digital literacy or familiarity with technology, with some preferring to minimize online interactions with companies where possible.

5.1 Phone communication as default

Telephone contact remains the overwhelming preference for vulnerable customers when engaging with SSE Airtricity. This preference is underpinned by several key factors:

- **Clarity of communication** – Customers find it easier to articulate complex issues and ask follow-up questions in real-time conversation.
- **Human connection** – Speaking directly with a person provides reassurance and the expectation of empathetic response to their circumstances.
- **Reduced ambiguity** – Verbal communication minimises the risk of misinterpretation compared to written channels.
- **Positive precedent** – The majority of participants reported positive experiences with SSE Airtricity's phone support, reinforcing this channel preference.

Callback functions for long queues are appreciated in general, though effectiveness was noted as inconsistent. Several participants reported mixed experiences across various service providers, with callbacks not always materialising as promised. When functioning properly, this feature is particularly valuable for vulnerable customers who may struggle to wait on hold for extended periods.

5.2 Other communication channels

Email

A minority of participants expressed preference for email contact, citing specific advantages:

- Permanent record of all interactions for future reference
- Eliminates the risk of missing important calls
- Flexibility to respond at their own pace
- Removes pressure of immediate response or need to wait on hold

Email is particularly favoured when customers anticipate being transferred between multiple departments, as it circumvents potentially lengthy waiting times. Additionally, some participants expressed caution about answering unexpected calls from unknown numbers, making email a more secure-feeling option, without risk of missing important contact from not answering a call. It should be noted that not all vulnerable customers have consistent mobile phone access, with some lacking mobile devices entirely and others using basic phones without smart capabilities.

Website and app usage

Digital platform usage varies significantly based on individual capabilities, preferences, and digital literacy levels. Where used, website and app interfaces are primarily valued for transactional purposes – bill management and prepayment meter top-ups – rather than as communication channels. The ability to top up PAYG meters online was specifically highlighted as a valuable feature for those comfortable with digital platforms.

Perspectives on live chat

Live chat emerged as the least favoured communication channel, with most participants expressing firm negative views based on previous experiences across various service providers. Key concerns include:

- **Frustration with repetition** – Having to re-explain issues multiple times without resolution
- **Automated responses** – Receiving generic, unhelpful responses that don't address specific queries
- **Uncertainty about interaction type** – Difficulty determining whether they are communicating with a human or automated system
- **Perceived divided attention** – Assumption that human agents are managing multiple conversations simultaneously, limiting effectiveness
- **Barrier to human contact** – Live chat is viewed as an obstacle to reaching genuine human support rather than a legitimate support channel

Even participants who expressed theoretical openness to live chat with human agents indicated they would be unlikely to initiate contact through this channel unless no alternatives were available and would struggle to establish confidence that any agent they interact with is actually human. The prevailing assumption that all live chat functions are automated has created a significant trust deficit. Some participants suggested they might reconsider if service standards improved substantially, but current experiences across the service provider landscape have eroded confidence in this channel's ability to meet vulnerable customers' needs effectively.

6 Vulnerable Customer Onboarding

6.1 Awareness of schemes

Vulnerable customers become aware of the Vulnerable Customer Register through multiple pathways, reflecting both proactive identification by SSE Airtricity staff and customer-initiated enquiries. Awareness remains incidental rather than systematic, and the research identified several primary routes to registration:

- **At point of account opening** – SSE Airtricity staff prompt new customers during the sign-up process, enquiring whether they meet any vulnerability criteria (more commonly recalled by recent customers)
- **During routine customer service interactions** – Existing customers are identified during interactions and invited to register after contacting customer support for other matters.
- **Word-of-mouth recommendations** – Customers learn about specific services through informal networks (neighbours, family) and subsequently contact SSE Airtricity to access them.
- **Service-driven discovery** – Particularly common among gas customers seeking specific services such as meter relocations or safety checks, where registration becomes a necessary step to access the required service.
- **Previous provider experience** – Some customers, particularly recent switchers, arrive with existing knowledge of Vulnerable Customer Registers from former suppliers.
- **Proactive customer enquiry** – More common among electricity customers with critical equipment needs, who specifically contact SSE Airtricity to understand available support provisions.

6.2 Sign-up experience

Recall of the registration process varies across customers, from clear recollection to complete unawareness. Some participants could only vaguely remember signing up, whilst others – across both gas and electricity services – had no memory of the registration process. Notably, some customers appear to have been registered without fully realising they were being added to a Vulnerable Customer Register. This phenomenon was particularly pronounced among customers of pensionable age without additional health conditions. Several factors can contribute to limited recall of sign-up:

- **Temporal factors** – Extended time since registration has dimmed recollection of the process
- **Limited subsequent engagement** – Without regular interaction with services, the Vulnerable Customer Register becomes forgettable
- **Conceptual framing** – Customers can perceive themselves as ‘signing up for a meter movement’ or specific service rather than ‘registering as a vulnerable customer’.

For those who do recall the registration process, experiences were consistently positive. Participants reported feeling supported and understood throughout, with staff demonstrating courtesy and empathy that facilitated comfortable disclosure of personal circumstances. The administrative requirements were described as minimal and straightforward, with documentation requirements and submission processes causing no significant burden.

Consistent with broader perceptions of SSE Airtricity's customer service, customers particularly valued the professionalism and genuine empathy demonstrated by staff. The absence of patronising behaviour was

specifically noted – customers appreciated that staff maintained their normal tone and manner when discussions moved to vulnerability and priority services, avoiding what one participant termed ‘fake pity’.

Dual fuel customers demonstrated particularly limited recall of registration processes, with many unable to remember whether they had registered separately for each service or through a single process (if remembering at all). This group was disproportionately represented among those completely unaware of their registration status.

7 Attitudes Towards Supports

7.1 Existing knowledge and experience

Awareness and understanding of the Vulnerable Customer Register vary significantly across the customer base, as highlighted in previous sections. Even among those registered, knowledge of entitlements remains basic and fragmented, with some customers on both gas and electricity registers remaining entirely unaware of their classification as vulnerable customers or their registration status.

Knowledge of the breadth of available services and support provisions is notably limited across the sample. Understanding ranges from complete unawareness of any entitlements to partial knowledge of specific services e.g. some gas customers knowing about safety checks and/or meter relocations, and certain electricity customers being aware of priority restoration during outages. Customer knowledge is largely determined by direct experience and immediate need. Participants typically only knew about services they had previously accessed or those addressing their most pressing concerns.

Gas customers demonstrated higher engagement levels with available services compared to electricity-only customers, reflecting the tangible nature of services such as annual safety checks (of benefit to all regardless of vulnerability) and meter relocations (relevant to any with mobility challenges and sub-optimally positioned meters). Electricity customers with critical equipment needs showed similarly high engagement, while those without specific vulnerabilities showed minimal interaction with available supports.

Despite limited awareness of the full support system, all participants expressed satisfaction with the support they had received and were aware of. Those with significant needs largely felt well-supported by SSE Airtricity, citing specific evidence including positive service experiences and proactive interventions such as pre-storm home visits and advance warning of planned outages.

7.2 Response to supports

As part of the research interviews, customers were informed that the research was concerning the Vulnerable Customer Register, and a full list of supports was read out to participants to gauge responses. For most, this was the first exposure to the full range of available supports that they recalled, with numerous services being received as new information (granted, some of these were perceived as less relevant).

The response to this information was positive. Customers consistently felt that SSE Airtricity's provisions were comprehensive, with no significant gaps identified. The register was recognised as an extensive support system spanning both gas and electricity services, designed to accommodate a diverse range of vulnerability needs. Participants who had not previously engaged with support services (beyond provisions such as meter readings and gas safety checks) expressed strong confidence in SSE Airtricity's ability to deliver these services effectively and feel reassured of support in the potential event that their needs change in future. Many of the supports (e.g. appliance adaptors, alternative formats, nominated contact, etc.) are viewed by most as positive measures to have in place for potential future needs. The 'safety net' of support offered by the register is appreciated, as is the peace of mind it grants with regards to potential future needs, however, awareness is low.

8 Gas Customer Experience

8.1 General feedback

Gas customers demonstrated higher awareness of their Vulnerable Customer Register status compared to electricity only customers, though awareness was not universal across the sample. None reported experiencing gas supply interruptions beyond personal boiler failures, during which affected customers temporarily stayed with family members while repairs were completed. Overall sentiment among gas customers was positive, with participants expressing satisfaction with their service and appreciation for available supports. This positive foundation is important context when considering specific service delivery challenges experienced by some participants.

Where difficulties were reported, these typically centred on two specific areas: the meter relocation process and occasional confusion regarding billing arrangements. These issues, while significant for affected customers, were viewed as exceptions rather than representative of their overall experience.

8.2 Billing

Several gas customers using direct debit payment methods reported experiencing confusion with their billing arrangements. The primary source of confusion related to understanding credit balances on their accounts. One participant described persistent difficulty interpreting year-end statements, where credit balances were displayed as negative figures despite the account being in credit – an issue requiring multiple contacts with customer service for clarification. The same customer discussed having to phone up to rectify recurring incorrect dates or timings shown on monthly payments.

Other participants expressed appreciation for flexible payment options, particularly the ability to make advance payments in increments against their direct debit arrangements. However, these advance payments are not clearly reflected in their account statements, leaving customers uncertain about their true credit position if not keeping their own records. Without visibility of this, confirming credit balances requires direct contact with SSE Airtricity, creating an additional administrative burden for customers attempting to manage their accounts.

A specific accessibility challenge emerged for visually impaired customers. While one customer praised SSE Airtricity for providing large-print bills accommodating their visual needs, they highlighted an inability to complete phone payments independently due to the requirement to input card details via keypad – a task requiring assistance from family members. While security protocols are understood and appreciated, the absence (perceptual or otherwise) of alternative verification methods can leave visually impaired customers feeling excluded from standard processes.

The same customer described an occasion where they were upset as a result of being unable to pass security verification due to not having their gas meter serial number readily available. This highlights an opportunity for enhanced accessibility protocols – establishing alternative verification procedures and ensuring staff are equipped to redirect customers to appropriate accommodations would prevent vulnerable customers from feeling unable to access services independently.

8.3 Pre-pay meters

Most gas customers in the sample used prepayment meters, with some of the most vulnerable relying on family members or neighbours to top up their cards at retail locations. Physical distance from shops, combined with mobility limitations and health conditions, creates substantial barriers to maintaining meter credit. Several participants described current struggles with shop visits, finding themselves unable to leave home during periods of pain or illness. Others acknowledged that without family support or reluctantly asking neighbours for favours, the frequency of required shop visits would be unmanageable. This reliance on others fundamentally undermines the independence that participants value so highly.

The inability to top up gas prepayment meters online emerged as a particular frustration, especially when compared to electricity prepayment options (both with SSE Airtricity and other providers) that offer online top-up facilities. Participants struggled to reconcile this service disparity and strongly desired equivalent online functionality for gas meters.

Technical failures can compound these challenges. Some participants reported instances where top-ups failed to register, with refunds taking up to six weeks to process. During these periods, customers must purchase replacement cards at £5 each, plus make additional trips home to register new cards before attempting to top up again. For cost-conscious vulnerable customers already managing tight budgets, these unexpected expenses and repeated shop visits represent difficulty.

The current £49 top-up limit, combined with rising gas prices and the absence of online payment options, creates ongoing concern. Several prepayment customers suggested increasing this limit would reduce shop visit frequency – a change that would particularly benefit those with mobility challenges.

8.4 Experiences with Vulnerable Customer Supports

Meter Readings

Experiences were uniformly positive, with participants describing the ongoing process as seamless and non-intrusive. The typical outdoor location of gas meters minimises any sense of invasion, contributing to overall satisfaction with this service.

Meter reading services are the most familiar support to gas customers, though some are unaware that this is a priority customer benefit rather than a standard service offered by SSE.

Gas Safety Checks

Gas safety checks are highly valued by those aware of the service, with participants expressing strong appreciation for this proactive safety measure. Most eligible customers had utilised this support (excepting recent register additions), although some participants were unaware this service resulted from their Vulnerable Customer Register status. The service provides significant peace of mind, particularly for those living alone or managing health conditions.

A minority reported confusion about service scope, with one participant believing SSE Airtricity previously offered boiler servicing rather than safety checks, expressing uncertainty about current entitlements until the full-service list was presented during interview.

Feedback on safety check experiences was overwhelmingly positive. Participants reported no difficulties arranging appointments, with engineers consistently demonstrating punctuality, professionalism, and valuable expertise. The provision of specific guidance – such as warnings about boiler pressure or other safety concerns – was particularly appreciated.

Scheduling was generally smooth, and whilst it typically occurs via phone, some participants who routinely miss phone calls (from SSE Airtricity or otherwise) suggested email confirmation would be beneficial. Several noted that annual checks don't always occur without prompting, expressing a preference for proactive scheduling reminders. It is possible, however, that there is overlap between those that admit to regularly missing phone calls and those not getting safety checks less frequently than annually.

Meter Movements

Some customers were previously unaware of meter movement as an option, believing meter positions to be fixed. Some confusion exists regarding service funding, for example one participant in rented accommodation reported their housing association covered costs rather than SSE Airtricity.

For those who had utilised this service, the positive impact was transformative. Customers described relocated meters making life easier through safe and manageable access. As a one-time service with permanent benefits, successful relocations were valued as an impactful support.

Evaluations of the service come down to length of time between confirmation and execution. When the process worked smoothly, customers were delighted with the service. Positive experiences feature quick turnaround times (within weeks), good communication throughout the process, clear timelines, and minimal need for follow-up contact. These smooth experiences left customers feeling well-supported and valued.

Conversely, negative experiences centred on extended waiting periods of 6-9 months, during which customers made frequent contact with SSE Airtricity seeking updates, and ultimately needed to be escalated before resolution. The uncertainty inherent in lengthy delays generated concern, with some customers reporting daily calls during particularly uncertain periods. It should be noted that even in difficult cases, the complaints department received specific praise for their effectiveness, empathy, and staff quality. However, customers had already experienced considerable frustration and worry by the point of escalation.

From the customer perspective, prolonged delays represent unnecessary stress attached to an entitlement. While SSE Airtricity may have limited control over outsourced service delivery timeframes, customers hold SSE Airtricity responsible as both the service provider and their primary contact point. Enhanced expectation management, improved communication about potential delays, and clearer signposting to escalation routes for vulnerable customers experiencing difficulty would help mitigate frustration.

Additional concerns included instances of subcontractors not tidying up, such as leaving pipe work unfinished or excavated material in driveways. While viewed less of an issue when overall experiences were positive, such oversights compounded frustration following lengthy delays or difficult arrangement processes.

For vulnerable customers, the process of accessing services can be as important as the services themselves, and protracted delivery processes can become sources of anxiety and stress.

9 Electricity Customer Experience

9.1 General feedback

Awareness of Vulnerable Customer Register status among electricity-only customers was notably more variable than among gas customers, influenced by individual health circumstances and the immediacy of support needs. This lower awareness can be partly attributed to the limited direct service interactions experienced by electricity customers in the sample.

Unlike some gas customers that have engaged with tangible services such as safety checks or meter relocations, electricity customers had minimal direct service engagement. None of the electricity customers in the research had utilised services requiring contractor visits, such as meter relocations, and there is no electricity equivalent to the annual gas safety checks that create regular touchpoints for gas customers. This absence of routine service interactions means several participants had forgotten their Vulnerable Customer Register status entirely until prompted during the research interviews. Without ongoing service engagement to reinforce their registration, the Vulnerable Customer Register remains abstract rather than actively present in customers' consciousness, besides those dependent on machinery or equipment.

Despite limited service utilisation, no electricity customers expressed any dissatisfaction with priority services available to them. The value derived from registration, while different in nature from gas customers' experiences, remained positive.

9.2 Billing

The vast majority of electricity customers reported smooth, issue-free experiences with billing and payment processes. This represents a notably more straightforward experience compared to some of the complexities reported by gas customers. Most electricity customers in the sample use prepayment meters and particularly value the ability to top up online – a feature some explicitly contrasted favourably with gas prepayment arrangements. This convenience eliminates many of the access challenges that gas prepayment customers face, allowing electricity customers to maintain their independence regardless of mobility or health fluctuations. Some participants were using specific tariffs, finding cheaper night rates particularly beneficial for managing costs when living alone.

Minor technical issues were reported by some, including recurring error messages when entering top-up codes via keypad. These customers questioned why an automatic top-up feature isn't available to prevent such issues. Generally, however, electricity bills were considered straightforward and easy to understand.

9.3 Experiences with Vulnerable Customer Supports

Meter Readings

Electricity customers expressed high satisfaction with meter reading services, mirroring the positive experiences reported by gas customers. Those who utilise SSE Airtricity-organised meter readings described the process as painless and without issue, with no disruption to their routines.

For those submitting readings independently, the online submission process works smoothly. However, some participants expressed concern about potential future requirements to submit photographic

evidence of readings, as several do not own smartphones. While not a current requirement, this anticipatory concern highlights the ongoing digital divide affecting some vulnerable customers.

Priority Supply

Customers experience more electricity supply interruptions than with gas, particularly during severe weather events. Outages can cause significant distress and practical difficulties for vulnerable customers, making priority restoration services particularly valuable.

Among electricity customers aware of the Vulnerable Customer Register, understanding centres primarily on expedited power restoration during outages – being among ‘the first houses with power restored’ – or provision of emergency generators when necessary. This knowledge, even at a basic level, provides substantial peace of mind. The reassurance derived from knowing they are prioritised during emergencies is profound, with aware customers reporting they feel genuinely valued and protected by SSE Airtricity. This sense of being looked after generates strong loyalty.

Customers with the most acute awareness of their Vulnerable Customer Register status and associated entitlements are typically those whose conditions create critical dependencies on consistent power supply, relying on medical equipment, or devices for health, mobility or comfort, or those with heightened heating requirements due to health conditions. For these customers, priority restoration represents vital protection.

For electricity customers in the sample, the Vulnerable Customer Register provides psychological security and confidence in crisis support rather than delivering regular, tangible services like those experienced by gas customers. While gas customers benefit from annual safety checks and physical interventions like meter relocations that reinforce their valued customer status, electricity customers derive their sense of value from the knowledge that support exists when most needed, even if the moment never arrives. This anticipatory reassurance proves equally valuable in supporting vulnerable customers' wellbeing and peace of mind.

10 Dual Fuel Customer Feedback

10.1 Differences across services

The research sought to understand whether dual fuel customers perceived differential treatment or service provision between their gas and electricity accounts. However, this customer group demonstrated the lowest engagement with Vulnerable Customer Register services, limiting the ability to draw meaningful comparisons. Dual fuel customers were disproportionately represented by those unaware of their Vulnerable Customer Register status, with some participants discovering their registration only during the research interview. The sample's limited interaction with the services meant most participants had insufficient experience to evaluate potential differences in service delivery. This included customers awaiting their first Vulnerable Customer service interaction, one whose energy management is handled at building level, and others who had simply never engaged with available supports.

Where operational comparisons could be made, participants noted that electricity services were generally easier to manage than gas, primarily due to online prepayment options. However, beyond this practical difference in payment methods, participants reported no discernible variation in how SSE Airtricity manages their gas versus electricity Vulnerable Customer services.

Participants saw no particular advantage to holding both services with SSE Airtricity beyond administrative convenience. The consolidation of accounts was valued for simplicity rather than any enhanced service or loyalty benefits, with some noting that tangible loyalty rewards appear to be 'a thing of the past.'

10.2 Shared register

All participants strongly supported the concept of a unified Vulnerable Customer Register operating across energy suppliers. This enthusiasm was universal, with no participant identifying potential drawbacks to such an approach. The primary benefit identified was elimination of redundant processes—avoiding the need to provide the same vulnerability information multiple times or complete separate registration processes across different service areas. Participants viewed a shared register as a logical evolution that would reduce administrative burden while ensuring consistent support.

11 Potential Enhancements

Overall, vulnerable customers express satisfaction with SSE Airtricity's current service provision. Most are content when they can easily reach responsive staff who resolve queries efficiently without excessive waiting times or multiple redirections. The majority feel their immediate needs are being met, and when asked directly, many struggle to identify additional supports they would require. This positive baseline reflects well on existing infrastructure and service delivery. However, there is scope to alleviate certain pain points for vulnerable customers in terms of vulnerable customer service delivery, and broader SSE systems and processes.

Vulnerable customer service provision

Given that grievances tend to revolve around processes outside of SSE control and issues arise after SSE handover, areas to consider include:

- Strengthen service level agreements with outsourced contractors delivering vulnerable customer services such as meter movements and strive for better collaboration with outsourced partners. Specifically, focus on tighter delivery timeframes, and extra attention paid to site tidying for vulnerable customers.
- Implement a step post-process involving a check-in to assess the need for any follow up care i.e. removal of building materials.
- Communication to customers around timelines and potential for delays, as well as clear signposting to escalation pathways and processes.
- Maximise clarity on payments for outsourced work, ensuring that staff take the time to explain why customers are or are not entitled to SSE covering the cost, or if they or a housing association, for example, must pay.

General process improvements

Some areas raised by participants are in relation to wider SSE Airtricity services, rather than being specific to Vulnerable customer provisions. Areas where experiences could be improved:

- Prioritise development of online top-up capability for gas prepayment meters to achieve parity with electricity services. This represents a critical accessibility issue undermining customer independence. If this is out of scope, consider raising the top-up limit to reduce frequency of required store visits.
- Investigate automated top-up options for electricity or gas prepayment meters to prevent issues with manual code entry and reduce transaction failures.
- Maximize clarity on billing for direct debit Gas customers, as customers want to be able to easily check their credit balance.

Communication

Many customers remain unaware of the full breadth of services they are entitled to as vulnerable customers, and some don't know they're on the register at all. Proactive communication and regular check-

ins would increase their sense of being supported and valued, while also capturing changing needs over time. Consider establishing a comprehensive communication programme including:

- Clear overview of available services is outlined during registration (reinforced by flyers, emails, etc. outlining entitlements).
- Annual communications to all registered customers (e.g., annual statement or service guide) ensuring customers understand their entitlements regardless of immediate need.
- Reminders and proactive scheduling for services (particularly annual gas safety checks).
- Updates if and when new services become available.

Consider multiple communication channels to reinforce awareness, including emails, flyers, and phone calls, ensuring information reaches customers through their preferred format.

Additionally, general communication with SSE Airtricity for vulnerable customers could be enhanced by vulnerability flagging across customer accounts. Ensuring that vulnerable customer status is displayed and accessible to staff during interactions, in service of alternative verification methods, accessibility accommodations, and appropriate support pathways. A telephone equivalent of the password scheme in place for home visits (i.e. vulnerable customers set up a password to preface interactions with staff) could benefit customers that have struggled in the past with verification over the phone.

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