

Making consumer vulnerability an industry-wide priority

We know that affordability is an issue for everyone. But we recognise that the most vulnerable in society need extra help - and that's why we have a number of industry leading programmes in place to help those who need it most. We work systematically to understand our customers' needs, and to gather insights from them and from expert bodies, so that we can continuously improve our service and develop new ways to make sure all customers are treated fairly, no matter what their circumstances. We're calling on all suppliers to serve customers in vulnerable situations better.

Finding out who needs our help

We can't support those customers who need it if we don't know who they are. So, identifying customers in vulnerable circumstances is a huge challenge for our business and we make it an absolute priority.

Our agents are trained to listen to and recognise the signs of customers who may be falling into financial difficulties or other vulnerable situations. We share credit data with other organisations which helps us to identify external factors which may be affecting customers. We encourage customers to contact us and talk to us for more help. We receive referrals from charities such as StepChange and Christians Against Poverty.

What we do

Once we have identified those who need our help, we have a wide range of tools at our disposal to support them and, most importantly, the experienced and dedicated staff to use them:

- **Financial Hardship:** our customers in debt have been going down thanks to the hard work of our specialist team in Manchester who set up affordable repayment plans for 395,000 customers. Unlike

other suppliers, we never disconnect for debt and we don't pass on extra charges for things like sending reminders to those who can least afford it - we do everything we can to keep them safe, warm and 'on supply'. We have a relationship with the StepChange debt charity, offering a transfer service to provide customers with wider financial advice and support. Since 2013, we've referred over 19,000 customers directly to StepChange.

- **British Gas Energy Trust (BGET):** This is our own charity which offers grants to help clear energy debts and pay for new appliances, as well as funding debt advice in local communities for those harder-to-reach customers. In 2017 we gave BGET over £10 million, which helped provide more than 9,500 grants to families in need. The trust also gives debt relief grants and awards to non-British Gas customers, and it funds a nationwide network of debt advisers embedded in organisations including Citizens Advice.
- **Warm Home Discount:** This is a Government-mandated scheme which provides rebates of £140 a year to customers on certain benefits. We have some of the broadest eligibility criteria in the industry and last winter (2017/18) more than 650,000 of our customers received the discount. Our Warm Home Discount Broader Group reaches a wide range of

customers at risk of financial hardship and helps to relieve some of the pressures of winter fuel costs. We also proactively offer energy efficiency advice and have improved thousands of homes through our ECO (Energy Company Obligation) programme.

- **Priority services:** We have nearly 2.8 million households on our Priority Services Register, which offers additional help for people of pensionable age, disabled or chronically ill customers. That's an increase of over 400,000 households in 2017. This increase is partly due to new data flows within the industry which allow this information to be shared as well as better awareness among our agents of customers in vulnerable situations, together with other programmes such as Dementia Friends and our growing number of referral partnerships.
- **Prices and bills:** We offer a range of payment options such as direct debit, pay-as-you-go (PAYGE) meters and magnetic cards. We can support customers who fall into difficulties with a PAYGE meter by offering discretionary credit or fuel vouchers to ensure they stay on supply. This is growing due to the roll out of Universal Credit.
- **Working in partnership:** In 2017 we launched a number of new referral partnership programmes to help us better identify and support customers in need. We work closely with Christians against Poverty and Macmillan Cancer Support where they refer their clients to our specialist teams to provide customers with the right support. We also set up a unique partnership with Clic Sargent, the nation's leading charity supporting young people and children who have been diagnosed with cancer and their families. Families will often use more energy and have less disposable income during the period of a child's cancer treatment, we therefore make sure that they don't have their energy bills to worry about through account management and bespoke payment plans to suit their needs.

The Dementia Challenge

Dementia is a huge issue for our customers. Over 850,000 people live with dementia in Britain today. We estimate that at least 100,000 British Gas customers are living alone in their own homes with dementia, and a further 100,000 are living in the community with other people, many of whom have chronic health conditions including dementia. In 2015 we therefore decided to accept an invitation from the Prime Minister's Dementia Challenge Group and become one of 10 leading companies committed to modelling what it means to be fully dementia friendly.

As part of this, we created a bespoke Dementia Friends module for British Gas, working with the Alzheimer's Society in England and Wales and with Alzheimer

Scotland. To date over 21,000 of our people have become Dementia Friends. As a result of our work in this area we were asked by the Prime Minister's Dementia Challenge Group to lead the creation of best practice guidelines for the whole of the utility sector, including water and telecoms as well as energy. The report launched in February 2018.

Leading the industry

In 2014 we adopted a company-wide definition of vulnerability which aligns with those of Ofgem and the Financial Conduct Authority. It says: "A customer is vulnerable if, due to their personal circumstances, they may be unable to safeguard their personal welfare or that of other household members". This recognises that customers can be vulnerable for temporary reasons as well as age, health or disability.

In May 2017, British Gas achieved verification from the British Standards Institution for meeting its requirements to ensure that inclusive services are accessible to all customers equally, regardless of their circumstances. Citizens Advice announced that it will use this standard as the measure of how seriously energy suppliers take vulnerability. BSI has asked us to be the energy supplier representative on its working group on turning the standard into a fully-fledged kitemark.

Many other suppliers do not provide the sort of help that we do for those who need it. But we believe that supporting vulnerable customers is not an optional extra. It is a moral, social and commercial obligation. Energy suppliers cannot opt out. All suppliers must demonstrate that they can serve those who are most in need, with no exemptions. In fact, this is part of every supplier's operating licence conditions and it should be properly enforced. We want to ensure all suppliers, large or small, are held to account in their treatment of customers in vulnerable situations.

