

Spotlight Report 2022/2023

An independent report written by the NGED Customer Panel

1. Introduction

The Customer Panel (The Panel) is a group of knowledgeable and interested individuals who meet regularly to support National Grid Energy Distribution (NGED). To ensure the widest participation for the 2022/2023 year we have provided a mix of in-person and remote meetings. We have also provided a number of topic-specific surgeries which have enabled a more detailed analysis of specific themes or projects.

The Panel itself has been in place for around 15 years and currently has a pool of 29 permanent, expert members. During the year different Panel members attended each meeting or surgery, but all members received the relevant slide pack(s) and were encouraged to comment or provide ideas and feedback remotely.

Objectives

Our objectives as a Panel were reviewed at the beginning of the year and remain, to:

- Act as an advocate for consumers
- Provide expert advice on, but not limited to, NGED's initiatives, customer service and operations
- Provide feedback, analysis and opinion on NGED's initiatives
- Highlight and advise NGED on key issues of current or emerging consumer concern to help scope and shape NGED's approach
- Act as a "sounding board" to allow NGED to test innovation and ideas for initiatives
- Provide an environment where new ideas supporting NGED's development can be created, shared and evolved
- Support and facilitate partnerships between NGED and consumer or specialist interest groups

The Panel holds closed sessions for members preceding the main meeting with NGED. This facilitates an open discussion on any issues that need to be highlighted and allows discussion on how challenges or questions can best be presented. The closed session allows members to reflect on the agenda and ensures each member is able to raise new topics for further discussion and ask questions freely.

Make up

The Panel continues to be made up of interested and knowledgeable individuals from many varied organisations, many of whom have direct contact with customers on a daily basis; some of whom have operational experience and others with a more strategic focus. This enables us to act as an informed, and sometimes opinionated, 'critical friend' to NGED. However, we know we need to keep our knowledge and experience relevant to the changing needs of a DSO. We would welcome interest from sectors not currently covered by The Panel. Particularly we'd welcome representatives with experience in future energy scenarios, health, MP/central Government, for example. The following sectors are currently represented:

- Business & domestic customers
- Community Energy Groups
- Connections
- Customer service/consumer interest
- Distributed Generation
- Education/academics
- Emergency resilience
- Emergency services
- Fuel poverty/vulnerability
- Innovation/environment
- Major Energy Users
- Network security
- Parish Council/Local Authority/LEP
- Utilities/energy industry

2. Executive Summary

This has been a very busy year for the Panel with both whole panel meetings and surgeries enabling a true deep-dive into many aspects of NGED's work. It also expanded the buddying system to provide more focussed support on specific topics.

Following WPD's merger with National Grid and the launch of the RIIO-ED2 Business Plan, the Panel examined the final determinations and worked with NGED to ascertain how the delivery of the Plan could be adapted. The Panel continued to support the Social Contract and helped to pilot outreach activities in this regard.

A greater focus this year was on NGED support for disadvantaged communities with progress made on both discretionary funding and the Smart Energy Action Plans.

The Panel continued to focus on the strategic priorities previously agreed with stakeholders and continued to scrutinise, challenge and provide advice to NGED, whilst also getting into the granular detail of delivery where the Panel can bring external knowledge and expertise to the best advantage.

Focus areas this year included

- Continuing to provide feedback on NGED's Business Plan for RIIO-ED2, following the final determinations
- Additional support for the Community Matters Fund and Energy Affordability Fund
- The continuation of a number of sub-groups to sound out and test projects, communications and new innovative ideas, including the Winter Preparedness Campaign
- Additional Surgeries to review Connections, Community Energy and Social Obligations
- Continuation of the 'buddying' system to provide one to one support to NGED staff by Panel members with specific and relevant expertise
- Initial progress on the Smart Energy Action Plans
- Extensive work on the Social Contract and the interfacing Responsible Business Plan.

The Panel continues to set the agenda for meetings and request attendance by relevant NGED staff. We maintain a 12 month plan which provides an early indication of which topics are planned to be covered. This provides the dual advantage of enabling Panel members to see far in advance which meetings they are likely to want to attend (and potentially move around other commitments to enable attendance), but also provides NGED with advance notice of which staff will be required for which meeting. The plan is dynamic and must change with the circumstances, which has happened a number of times this year with national events taking a more prominent role.

"Once again our Customer Panel has provided truly excellent service to NGED, giving expert advice and critique which enabled us to better support all our customers. Having a Panel as experienced and knowledgeable as ours really does stand us in good stead, not just for delivery in the immediate term, but also looking into the future and what that may hold for electricity distribution"

Richard Allcock, Stakeholder Engagement Manager

3. 2022/23 - A year in focus

RIIO-ED2 Business Plan

Business plan and final determinations – throughout the year the Panel has investigated, discussed and made recommendations to NGED to support the new Business Plan and specifically reviewed the final determinations and the changes that will be required to the business plan following their delivery.

A number of Panel members also attended NGED's stakeholder workshops in June and September allowing useful feedback both at the events and back to other members at Panel meetings. June saw topic-specific workshops on Connectability; Sustainability; and Vulnerability and Affordability ascertain how stakeholder priorities had evolved. In September, NGED covered the Ofgem draft determination following its final business plan submission and sought stakeholder views on NGED's commitments in the following areas: a smart and flexible network; connections; community energy; innovation; environment and sustainability; customers in vulnerable situations; Social Contract; customer service; network resilience; safety; IT and cyber; and workforce resilience.

Funding

Energy Affordability Fund – the Panel has worked closely with NGED to expand the Energy Affordability fund this year. With an appreciation of the intricacies of staffing these projects, the long set up times and the need to act on feedback as it is received to revise innovative projects, the Panel was delighted that the funds would now be in place for a full 12 months. The fund pot has also been increased to some £113k.

Community Matters – the Panel once again discussed past and future topics and provided advice and critique on how the funding was allocated, distributed and evaluated, encouraging NGED to go further than in previous years. Funding was increased in 2022/23 including a fuel poverty phase of £2.5m. Additional focus is now on supporting those funded projects to ensure that the benefits can be realised and demonstrated. Tracking of the delivery has been enhanced to ensure that impacts and learnings can be shared.

National Grid £50 million support fund – In November 2022 National Grid Group announced a fund to help alleviate financial distress caused by rising energy costs. Although the Panel itself was not instrumental in the inception of this fund there was wholehearted endorsement and pleasure in seeing a number of current delivery partners benefitting from the funding. These included the National Energy Foundation, Affordable Warmth Solutions, National Energy Action and Citizens Advice. Each organisation will be able to build on existing delivery and continue to support those on the PSR.

“The Panel continues to help NGED to plan, formulate and deliver our support to Customers in vulnerable situations. Having a group to consult with, many of whom have day to day and face-to-face interactions with this difficult to reach constituency is pivotal to our delivery”.

Tracy Cullen, Social Obligations Officer

Focussed Support

Surgeries

Our topic-specific surgeries continue to provide NGED with the most in-depth support. These enable a true deep-dive analysis of the detail of a specific topic, but they also allow time to discuss future strategic direction. Unlike the main Panel meetings, they tend to be attended by a smaller group of individuals who have a particular interest or knowledge of the subject. Discussions tend to be very focussed and this year covered;

- **Community Energy (CE)** – This provided an overview of NGED’s past and current work with CE groups, which is delivered in partnership with Regen, and covered energy saving/efficiency advice, fuel poverty action, community net zero action, local energy resilience, connections, flexibility and community owned renewables. There was a specific focus on what policies could enable and which could hinder the work of Community Energy groups. Challenges from the Panel included whether rural communities were sufficiently involved, what impact the final determinations may have on NGED’s plans for Community Energy Engineers and how CE Groups could continue to be involved in innovation projects.
- **Social Obligations** – A full 360 review of current NGED provision, which included a number of case studies, was followed by a discussion of the complexities of providing help to an increasingly vulnerable group of customers. NGED reported on their results for the year and planned actions for the next year. The Panel endorsed the planned actions and particularly welcomed the proposed increase in the Energy Affordability Fund and support for front line staff. Further discussions took place around the planned Smart Energy Action Plans (SMEAPs) which will have a specific surgery at a later date.
- **Connections and Local Network Investment** – A very wide ranging surgery which included Automatic Acceptance Process for domestic Low Carbon Technologies (LCTs), a Roadmap to self-serve connections and the transition to Net Zero. Local Investment events and feedback from them was analysed with a particular focus on turning that feedback into action. The Panel especially welcomed NGED’s new one-to-one sessions with stakeholders at these events. A number of actions were proposed by NGED which were again endorsed by the Panel, particularly those which involved the production of online information and tools which would help to speed up delivery and approval of connections.

Buddying

The Buddying system continued this year and brought more benefits to NGED. This approach ensures that a Panel member with most relevant experience can support the NGED responsible employee on a one to one basis, sharing experience and expertise. Particular progress was provided with:

- The development and delivery of Social Contract actions, including our first community solar panel initiative (see Rednock case study)
- PSR data sharing and changes to NGED’s lawful basis for sharing customer data
- Benchmarking and analysis of Winter preparedness communications

“We have a longstanding, successful relationship with NGED, frequently collaborating to deliver collectively better outcomes for our customers and I’m delighted to be involved as a ‘buddy’ on their pioneering Customer Panel. It is great to have recently started two-way sharing of PSR data having been receiving records from NGED for over four years now. Sharing learning and ideas enables us all to be more efficient, consistent and innovative – driving meaningful change for as many customers as possible - and that can only be a good thing.”

Kate Robbins, Head of Customer Policy, Wessex Water

Winter preparedness campaign

Once NGED had determined to undertake a wide scale Winter Preparedness Campaign across the licenced areas it was inevitable that they would run it past the Panel for analysis and comment. There was considerable discussion about the potential for power cuts and rolling disconnections and the Panel had lots of advice and opinion as to how these may best be communicated to customers, especially those on the PSR. A review took place of all proposed communications materials. This included digital advertisements and social media posts, printed media such as leaflets to be distributed and posters to go on the back of buses, letters and emails and radio adverts.

A number of changes were recommended by the Panel, all of which were taken on board by NGED. In the main these focussed on accessibility for those more vulnerable customers, but also included advice on regularity of messaging or opinion as to how certain messaging may be perceived and what reactions it might incite. Specific members of the Panel were able to relate their own experience of communicating with specific customer segments, such as those without English as a first language or those with hearing difficulties. The Panel was particularly pleased with how their suggestions were welcomed by the NGED team and would be delighted to support future campaigns of this nature.

“Discussions with the Panel really helped us to hone our messaging to customers as we developed our biggest ever winter preparedness campaign. Panel members offered a fresh perspective on our plans and their views resulted in changes to our documentation and communications plan that helped to make sure the campaign had such a great impact. We’ll definitely be coming back to them next year.”

Christopher Hayton, Corporate Affairs Director

Examples of the bus and social media advertising:



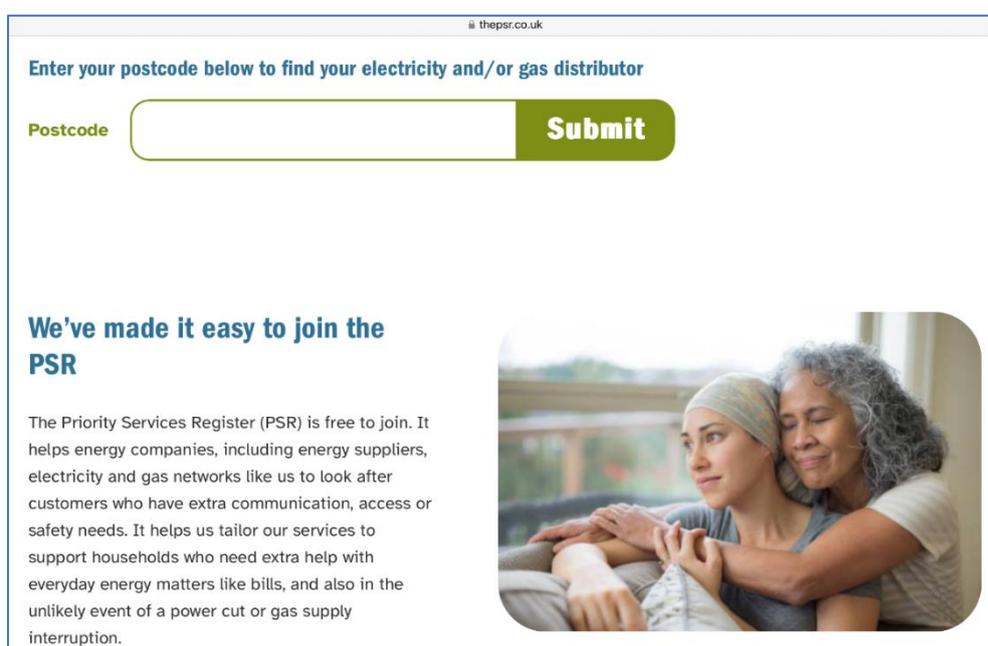
User Acceptance Testing PSR.co.uk

The Panel was asked for opinion, advice and action on the potential for a new PSR landing page for England and Wales which would direct visitors to their own local Distribution Network Operator. The website was already in its final stages, but a review of the text and testing of the functionality were needed. A number of Panel members volunteered for User Acceptance Testing and provided this service. A number of recommendations were made for changes, particularly to the text and a few glitches were identified. The Panel also made recommendations for the web address.

“It’s really helpful to have a group of people I can turn to for timely, expert advice. Members of the Panel provided user testing for the new PSR website and gave some really useful feedback. I was able to share their positive reviews and suggested improvements with the industry working group and the developers implemented their suggestions prior to the website going live”.

Nicki Johnson, Stakeholder Engagement Officer

ThePSR.co.uk web page:



The screenshot shows the PSR.co.uk website. At the top, it says "thePSR.co.uk". Below that is a heading: "Enter your postcode below to find your electricity and/or gas distributor". There is a text input field labeled "Postcode" and a green "Submit" button. Below the form is a section titled "We've made it easy to join the PSR". The text in this section reads: "The Priority Services Register (PSR) is free to join. It helps energy companies, including energy suppliers, electricity and gas networks like us to look after customers who have extra communication, access or safety needs. It helps us tailor our services to support households who need extra help with everyday energy matters like bills, and also in the unlikely event of a power cut or gas supply interruption." To the right of this text is a photograph of two women, one younger and one older, sitting together and looking out a window.

Social Contract Update

Whilst Individual Panel members have worked very closely with NGED in the formation of the Social Contract, via our Buddying system, the whole Panel has taken an avid interest in how the Contract is being implemented within the organisation and how it is being used to 'actively benefit' NGED's customers and wider society. This year we were particularly pleased to see this work being realised in the 'Rednock project'. The project was commissioned as a pilot to establish an effective, sustainable model for delivering community solar installations in a way that maximises social value and can inform the roll out of similar projects across NGED

Responsible Business Charter

With NGED having developed and launched the Social Contract in December 2021, the merger with National Grid has instigated a thorough examination of the provision of ESG within the two organisations, not least to see whether there are overlaps, but also to ascertain if each can learn best practise from the other. The Panel therefore undertook a review of National Grid's Responsible Business Charter. This took the form of an initial analysis of the current Charter followed by a number of interviews with members of the Panel. The aim was to provide an initial view as to how the Charter was formulated and implemented, provide ideas for any updates or changes and finally provide opinion as to how the Charter and Contract would be integrated into NGED delivery. Work on this will now continue into the 23/24 year.

Appendix 1 - Customer Panel spotlight case study: Rednock pilot

In its RIIO-ED2 Business Plan for the period 2023-28, National Grid Electricity Distribution (NGED) made a commitment to: *Build decarbonised communities and local energy schemes by providing £540,000 shareholder funded support per year to install solar PV on schools in areas of high economic deprivation.*

To deliver this commitment in practice, a pilot study was commissioned at Rednock School in the rural town of Dursley, Stroud.

Rednock School is a comprehensive school with ~1,200 students in attendance. In 2009, the school underwent a complete rebuild, including the installation of many eco-friendly features such as a sedum roof, biomass boiler and small solar panel installation. However, many of these features have not been maintained/used effectively and some have become completely defunct despite the efforts of school management.

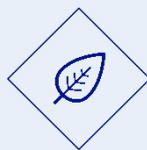
Objectives

The reason for commissioning this pilot was to establish an effective, sustainable model for delivering community solar installations in a way that maximises social value, to inform the roll out of similar projects across National Grid's region.

The aim of the pilot was therefore to install solar panels at a community site, while generating wider social benefits within the community through links to education, outreach and consumer vulnerability programmes, to achieve the following objectives:



Reduce the school's carbon emissions and embed sustainable approaches



Improve biodiversity and drive nature recovery on school grounds



Empower students to tackle climate change and shape the school's net zero roadmap



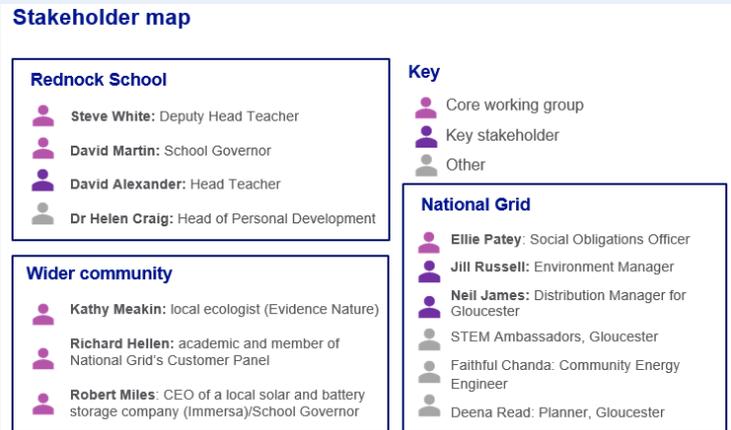
Across all three: engaging the wider community in sustainability, energy (including awareness of the PSR and fuel poverty services) and biodiversity, with the school as a seed point.

Customer Panel engagement

A working group of key regional stakeholders met weekly to develop and deliver the project outcomes, ensuring that the pilot is not only used as a foundation for National Grid's community solar project, but also as the basis for further sustainability activities in the school and wider area. NGED's first Customer Panel 'buddy' has supported both the development of the Social Contract, and its implementation in a local, rural context at Rednock School. Close collaboration has been vital to the development of the community solar project, providing challenge and steer that has helped National Grid identify and achieve wider community benefits. Regular feedback to the wider Panel has helped ensure a breadth of expert input as the pilot has progressed.

“I have worked with the Customer Panel as a specialist in low carbon energy technologies and applied systems thinking. Helping to formulate the Social Contract and taking the opportunity to help develop policy into practical implementation is both challenging and rewarding. It aligns well with my local secondary school’s desire to both improve its environmental performance and become more engaged with the community, Cam and Dursley, in which it is embedded.”

“We have two initial projects, firstly to deliver the model solar PV project that will be scaled up across other schools and secondly, the development of a simple but rigorous “citizen science” method for quantifying biodiversity net gain - a method that National Grid will then deploy internally as part of its environmental strategy. It has to be said that these projects are already generating exciting follow-on activities in our community which will benefit greatly from the relationships we have developed with National Grid staff.” – Richard Hellen, the Schumacher Institute (and Customer Panel ‘buddy’)



Pilot outcomes

- The installation of a 19kW solar array at the school generating approx. 17,000kWh per year
- 120 students engaged on STEM careers and the role of National Grid
- The development of an innovative ‘citizen science’ model for quantifying biodiversity net gain at NGED sites and on school grounds – tested with biology students via four workshops
- A social return on investment (SROI) of £3.74 over and above every £1 spent, over 10 years, as a result of financial and carbon savings made by the school, and the benefits of STEM education.



Conclusion

The pilot has proven successful, delivering positive outcomes for National Grid and Rednock School which surpass the initial aims of the Business Plan commitment. In particular, the development of biodiversity and educational activities has been shaped and improved by the close collaboration of the working group, school staff and National Grid teams.

“The rich insights and rural perspective provided through the Customer Panel buddy system, and wider Panel collaboration, have been invaluable to the work at Rednock, enabling us to identify further opportunities to add value through education and biodiversity activities. As a result, we have created a blueprint to roll this project out across our region.”

Ellie Patey, Social Obligations Officer

Appendix 2 - Customer Panel biographies

Our Panel is made up of members with diverse experience, knowledge and interests. Below are just a few example biographies demonstrating the depth and experience that members bring.

Gabby Mallett has been Chair of the Customer Panel since 2021 and was a Panel member for over a decade prior to that. She previously worked as the Operations Director for the National Energy Foundation (NEF) where she focused on Renewable Energy, Energy Efficiency and the impact of Homes on Health. Her expansive knowledge and experience enable her to appreciate the strategic direction of NGED whilst also understanding the detail.



Retrofit - Whilst at NEF Gabby devised and managed many major multi-million pound projects, including the multi award winning SuperHomes, showcasing properties which have reduced their carbon emissions by at least 60 and Energiesprong an international project focusing on Net Zero domestic renovations.

Workforce - A varied career has provided Gabby with extensive experience in man-management and HR, including development of workforce management and training plans in a number of organisations. In 2016 Gabby helped to set up, and was one of the original directors of, the Retrofit Academy which aimed to provide retrofit knowledge and skills to the UK workforce.

Renewables - Leading the Communities team at NEF provided plenty of opportunity for Gabby to support local action and this in turn led to her becoming director of her local 4.2MW solar farm. She also previously authored YouGen, a renewable energy website aimed at domestic customers. Gabby currently holds shares in many community energy projects.

Health - Gabby's first career was with BUPA which provided a basic understanding of health issues which in turn led her to develop affordable warmth projects to support vulnerable customers, especially those whose cold homes detrimentally affected their health.

Gabby has been instrumental in winning 3 coveted and prestigious Ashden Awards, for SuperHomes, for Energiesprong and for WHISCERS, an innovative internal insulation system which she helped to design.

Finally, Gabby has extensive experience in managing disparate groups of people and chairing meetings, ensuring that all perspectives can be aired and that no voice has more weight than any other.

Gabby holds a first degree in Economics and Politics and a masters in Environment and Social Policy.



Richard Hellen joined the Customer Panel in 2019 at the invitation of a WPD Director (Alison Sleightholm) having engaged enthusiastically in a number of the Stakeholder Engagement events over several years. He has worked in the energy sector all his working life, graduating in physics, joining the CEGB as a Research Officer, to work on nuclear reactor safety. This research led to nuclear safety assessment at several of our nuclear stations which in turn resulted in work on the operational safety management systems that were adopted across all the UK's nuclear stations. The next phase of his career focussed on the new challenge of how to account for human factors within the generic approach to probabilistic risk assessment, now used as the basis of nuclear safety cases.



A change in career direction within the nuclear industry saw Richard move into a period of wider strategic issues that included providing active participation in a range of low carbon technologies; renewable energy and energy storage technologies, essentially providing an in-house horizon scanning function for the senior management within the nuclear energy sector. Part of this work even resulted in a very early engagement with a range of industries and government departments that were starting to show an interest in Electric Vehicles – in the early 1990's.

He was also instrumental in the start-up of one of the earliest commercial companies that harnessed the opportunities to use small scale Combined Heat and Power (CHP) technology as part of an energy service Company (ESCO).

Early retirement allowed him to consult in low carbon energy strategy which included providing training internationally in techno-economic modelling methods at post graduate level. In addition, Richard became a director of a low carbon trade body and of a think tank specialising in systems thinking methods applied to sustainability, The Schumacher Institute for Sustainable Systems. He has also been an active member of the Energy Sector Group and Infrastructure Investment Panel for Gloucestershire's Local Enterprise Panel.

Partly as a result from working to help shape WPD's new business plan, he has become particularly engaged in the Social Contract aspects working within his own community. This has resulted in a close collaboration with the local secondary school to trail blaze the process that has resulted in the installation of the first of many solar PV systems across the NGED areas. Using the concept of the Living Laboratory approach, Richard is presently working to help make his own community future proof in collaboration with local specialists and larger organisations such as NGED.



Cathy Tibbles has been a member of the Customer Panel for many years, following her active engagement when attending a stakeholder event in Birmingham in 2013. Being a Panel member over this time, she has seen the impact on changing practices in the industry that domestic customers may not be aware of. Until recently she had worked in the Midlands for 21 years as a Parish Clerk in the first tier of local government. This job involved forging close links with community groups and supporting residents in their endeavours to access improved council services. She continues to promote this professional role through her continued membership of the Society of Local Council Clerks. She was elected as a county representative on their National Forum since 2008 and after a term as Vice-Chair in 2017 she became Chair in 2020.



Workforce - Prior to working for parish councils, Cathy worked in education finance and governance in the wider Midlands for 15 years. Having started her career in broadcasting governance, she has extensive knowledge of committee administration and management of effective meetings. Cathy has a long history of community involvement – from helping someone set up the first Victim Support Scheme in Birmingham to Debt Counselling for the CAB in Staffordshire and being a Girl Guide Leader for many years. She also produced a monthly community magazine for over 10 years. During her career, Cathy has managed teams of staff and been involved in all aspect of HR management, including frequent recruitment campaigns. She has also led and managed teams of volunteers in different community organisations, working to make a difference in self-led community initiatives. This was especially pertinent during the Covid-19 pandemic when she quickly established a team of 50 volunteers to support the vulnerable residents in the community where she worked.

Health – Cathy has maintained a keen interest since 2009 in a local charity that supports people with cancer or other chronic health conditions. Since becoming a trustee, she was able to help strengthen the organisation so that it not only survived the pandemic when all income streams were lost overnight (fundraising events could not take place and the drop-in Centre had to close until after lockdown restrictions eased) but celebrated the windfall donations from its Charity Ambassador, the local comedian Joe Lycett. When people find themselves unable to work due to either illness or caring responsibilities, they can face severe financial hardship. The charity is able to offer signposting help and when in a position of temporary vulnerability, it is also pertinent to help them maintain their domestic supply of electricity. The work that National Grid undertake with the Priority Service Register is something that Cathy has been keen to promote as strongly as possible. This area continues to be an important topic of interest.



Use of company logos on the preceding pages is designed to show the breadth of knowledge and experience of our Panel members. Inclusion of these logos does not indicate any endorsement of either the Panel or NGED of those organisations.

Report compiled by Gabby Mallet (Chair – NGED Customer Panel) with support and endorsement from The Panel.