

# VULNERABLE CUSTOMER STRATEGY 2021-2024

Identifying and supporting customers  
who may need some extra help



## Acknowledgements





We are very grateful for the support and guidance we received from many organisations to help us develop this strategy in line with the Northern Ireland Utility Regulator's Consumer Protection Programme.

To develop this strategy we:

- spoke to our employees about their experiences with customers
- reviewed the vulnerable customer services of other companies
- got advice and feedback from organisations in Northern Ireland who support vulnerable customers on a daily basis, and
- asked for recommendations from organisations that specialise in customer service.

We hope that you will see some of your contributions reflected in this document and will continue to support us over the coming years as we take steps to improve and develop our specialised services.

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“At NIE Networks, we want to continually improve our customer service. We work closely with the Northern Ireland Utility Regulator to deliver the goals of its Consumer Protection Programme.

This strategy aims to take the Consumer Protection Programmes' broad themes and tailor them into an ambitious strategy appropriate for our customers. It details the many services which we offer customers. Many of these services rely on the skills and competence of our employees and we're delighted that the ideas for improvement have come from them and other valued stakeholders.”

**Ronan McKeown**  
Customer & Market Services Director



# About us - NIE Networks

It is our job to look after the electricity networks in Northern Ireland. We transport electricity safely to all homes and businesses across the country.

We are committed to providing a reliable service to all our customers. Our 1,200 employees work around the clock, and around the country, to make this happen.

Although a lot of the work needed to keep the power flowing happens behind the scenes, there are times when you will come into contact with our employees. For example:

- Every three months, a meter reader will call to read your electricity meter.
- If there is a power cut or your electricity isn't working properly, our emergency teams are available day and night to fix faults and keep you updated on progress.
- Our planning and engineering teams will be available if you ask for work to be carried out on your property or if there is electricity equipment on your property that needs to be maintained or repaired.

When you come into contact with us, we aim to provide the best possible customer service. We know that vulnerable customers may need more time or support than for others, and providing a good service to them may take more time.

This document sets out who we consider to be a vulnerable customer, the specific services we have developed to support them, and how we plan to improve these services.

# Who are vulnerable customers?

We understand that vulnerability is not always visible, may be temporary, and may be due to external circumstances. We also understand that some customers may need extra time and support, or further explanations of when, why or how we are carrying out our work.

The services explained in this document are for household customers who:

- are critically dependent on electrically powered equipment (including life-protecting devices, technologies to support independent living and medical equipment),
- or
- are identified as needing extra support due to their personal characteristics or circumstances.

We have identified these customers based on the Utility Regulator's definition of vulnerable customers. This is set out in their Consumer Protection Programme, which states that a customer is considered to be vulnerable when 'their personal characteristics or circumstances reduce their ability to engage effectively and achieve fair outcomes'.



"Part of my role is to identify customers who may require some additional support. This was particularly important during the COVID-19 restrictions. For example, an older couple living in the country would normally have gone to their daughter's home if their power was off. Due to social distancing this was no longer possible and so our engineers passed their details to me for further support."

**Cormac McCamphill**  
Customer Relations Manager



# How we help

Providing a good service for everyone does not always mean providing the same service for everyone. Each year we invest around £0.5 million on support services specifically for more vulnerable customers.

There are over 20 tailored ways that we offer help and support to vulnerable customers.

## When your power goes off

We provide extra support for customers with healthcare needs. Some customers have medical equipment in their homes, such as specialised mattresses, feeding systems or lifting equipment. These types of equipment need electricity.

To support these customers, we have set up a Medical Customer Care Register. Anyone who uses electrical medical equipment can join this register.

If you are on our Medical Customer Care Register and your electricity goes off, the following will happen.

### You will speak directly to one of our team

We may not have much information about the cause or likely duration of the power cut when it first happens. We will call you back as soon as more information becomes available, or at an agreed time.

### We will call you back with regular updates

If there is a power cut, we may not have much information about the cause or likely duration of the fault when it first happens. As soon as more information becomes available, or at an agreed time, we will call you back.

### You can nominate an alternative contact

You can give us the details of a relative or friend we can contact if we cannot reach you.

## Identifying customers

Our teams work across Northern Ireland to maintain or upgrade the electricity network or read meters. We use this as an opportunity to identify customers who may need extra support, and let them know what support is available.

### When visiting customers' properties

If a meter reader sees medical equipment when they visit a customer's home, they will tell them about the Medical Customer Care Register. If the customer is interested in joining the register, our customer service team will call them to arrange this.

### During planned electricity outages

So that our engineers can work safely, sometimes we need to turn off a customer's electricity supply for a short time. If the customer is on our Medical Customer Care Register, our team will call that customer to make sure they know about the interruption and have a back-up plan in place.

### Support from other organisations

Customers on our Medical Customer Care Register may also need support from other organisations. When we contact our customers, we tell them where they can find more information about the support available and how to sign up.



“We joined the Register when my husband was diagnosed as being terminally ill. We had lots of specialised equipment at home so it was great peace of mind.”

**Margaret McClintock**  
Ballymoney customer



## When you contact us

We have taken steps to make it as easy as possible to contact us. You can contact us by phone, email, letter or text message. You can also speak to our employees face-to-face when they call to read your meter or sort out a problem with your electricity.

We understand that some customers may need more time or support than others. Here's how we help.

### We are a 'JAM Card friendly' business

Being a JAM Card friendly business means that our teams have undergone training to help them support customers with learning difficulties, autism or communication barriers, by discreetly giving them 'just a minute'.

### Our customer service team is dementia friendly

Employees who answer your calls, letters or emails are trained as 'Dementia Friends' in order to recognise and help in small ways.

### We will deal with your query quickly

We are committed to giving quick, effective answers. It can be confusing to repeat your query again and again. We will not ask you to do that. If the first person you speak to cannot sort the matter out, they will pass you to another colleague who can.



## When you need different types of communication

We have adapted or improved some of the ways that customers can contact us to make them accessible for as many people as possible.

Most customers prefer to phone us. However, all the facilities that we offer over the phone, such as being able to report a power cut or receive an update, are also available on our website.

### Customers with hearing or speech difficulties

We use the Relay UK service to help customers with hearing and speech difficulties contact us by telephone.

### Customers with reading difficulties

We have facilities on our website to increase text size, change the colour of the background or read text aloud.

### Customers who do not use English as their first language

We have facilities on our website to translate information into over 90 different languages.



“We plan work on our network far in advance so that we can give our customers notice if we need to turn off their electricity. We always check and speak to customers on our Medical Customer Care Register. The advance notice also gives customers time to contact us if they have specific issues or if their circumstances have changed. For example, if there has been a death in the family or someone is just out of hospital. We will always try to help.”

**Eamonn Maynes**  
Network Access Manager



## When we come to your home

Most electricity meters in Northern Ireland are inside homes. So we need to enter your property to read the meter and make sure it is safe.

Although anyone who calls at your home on our behalf has undergone safeguarding checks (checks of criminal records), we understand that you may have concerns about letting people into your home. Here's what we are doing to reassure you.

### 1. PSNI Quick Check Scheme

When a meter reader or engineer comes to your home, you can ring the PSNI's Quick Check 101 number to confirm they work at NIE Networks. The meter reader or engineer will wait for you to make the call or give you a card and come back later.

### 2. Password scheme

Our meter reader can give you a password, if you have agreed one with your electricity supplier, to prove they are genuine.

### 3. Appointment system

We can arrange appointments for reading your meter if you need extra time to give entry to your home or you would like to have someone with you.



# How we will improve

Following feedback from our employees, customers and other relevant people and organisations (stakeholders), we plan to improve our services for vulnerable customers.

We are committed to the following.

- Promoting our Medical Customer Care Register
- Improving the quality of information on our Medical Customer Care Register
- Providing regular training for employees
- Developing a specialist team for contact with vulnerable customers
- Providing information on other help and support
- Improving communications with our customers
- Improving our service for those with hearing and speech difficulties
- Giving our customers confidence
- Reviewing our service regularly



“Our Customer Service Agents are trained to treat everyone with respect and time. We understand that it can be daunting to call or message a big organisation like NIE Networks. Some people may need some additional reassurance or information and we are there to provide it.”

**Barbara Crawford**  
Contact Centre Manager



## Promoting our Medical Customer Care Register

We want to make sure that any customer who relies on electricity for their healthcare needs is on our Medical Customer Care Register.

We will be promoting the register through our employees and stakeholders, and through the media.

**Our goal is to increase the number of customers on the Medical Customer Care Register by 25% by 2024.**

*(Based on 2020 figures of 10,000 registered customers)*

## Improving the quality of information on our Medical Customer Care Register

We can provide a better service for customers if our records are up to date.

In line with our privacy policy, we will regularly contact customers on the Medical Customer Care Register to remind them of its benefits and update our records.

**Our goal is to contact all customers on our Medical Customer Care Register at least once every two years.**

## Providing regular training for employees

Many of the services we offer rely on our employees' expertise in identifying and supporting vulnerable customers.

We want to provide induction training for new staff and regular refresher training for existing employees.

**Our goal is to deliver regular JAM Card friendly training to all employees who come into contact with customers.**

## Developing a specialist team for contact with vulnerable customers

Being able to deal with customer queries quickly is important to us. We want to improve our service so that we can identify and support vulnerable customers.

**Our goal is to create a new set of skills for contact with vulnerable customers. Customers calling our contact centre will be able to choose to speak to specially trained agents.**

## Providing information on other help and support

We know that we cannot always provide all the help a customer needs. When this is the case, we aim to put you in contact with other organisations that can help. We do this by either 'signposting' or 'referral'.

Signposting means that we will give you details of relevant organisations you could contact. Referral means that we will get your permission to give your details to a relevant organisation who will contact you. We believe that, particularly for vulnerable customers, a referral system is a better way to provide support.

**Our goal is to work with other organisations to agree a new system for customer referrals.**

## Improving communications with our customers

Our engineers and meter readers have told us that they would like to be able to communicate better with customers who do not use English as their first language, particularly if there is a power cut or emergency.

**Our goal is to provide our employees with skills to help them communicate with non-English speaking customers.**

### **Improving our service for those with hearing or speech difficulties**

The textphone service that we have in place for customers who have difficulty using the phone is not commonly used. RNID have recommended we offer Relay UK as that is the service that most people who are deaf or hard of hearing use.

Our goal is to introduce the Relay UK service in our contact centre and train our employees to use it.

### **Giving our customers confidence**

We know that people want to have confidence in anyone who comes to their property. Our employees carry ID and will show it when meeting customers.

Our goal is to improve our employee ID cards to make them easier for customers to check.

### **Reviewing our service regularly**

We talk to our customers and stakeholders regularly and encourage them to give us feedback on our service. This helps us to improve.

Our goal is to contact stakeholders every year to report our progress against this strategy and hear how we could improve further.







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