



Article:

## Supporting Vulnerable Energy Customers Requires Collaborative Approaches

**Author:** Duncan McCombie  
CEO, YES Energy Solutions CIC  
duncan.mccombie@yesenergysolutions.co.uk

---

### **Executive summary**

The growing pressures of rising energy costs, broader cost of living challenges building increased prevalence, and depth, of fuel poverty have significantly increased the number of households considered vulnerable within the UK energy market. These challenges highlight a fundamental truth: no single organisation can provide the breadth of support required to meet the complex and diverse needs of vulnerable customers. Instead, effective assistance depends on strong partnership working across the regulatory environment, energy companies, national support organisations and hyper local third sector groups. Together, these interconnected actors are shaping a more coordinated, person-specific ecosystem of support.

### **Already doing great work**

We heard clearly at the recent *Insight Exchange: Energy* (27 February 2026) from a number of Collaboration Network members already working together, engaging, sharing and making a real and sustainable difference to householders up and down the country.

### **The parties involved**

At the core of this ecosystem is Ofgem, whose leadership provides the regulatory framework within which vulnerability support is anchored. Through its *Consumer*

*Vulnerability Strategy*, Ofgem sets expectations for how suppliers and Network operators should identify and assist customers at risk, emphasising proactive engagement and fair treatment. Ofgem's regulatory interventions - such as strengthened oversight of debt collection, mandatory vulnerability checks before involuntary prepayment meter installations and enhanced customer service requirements - ensure protections for vulnerable customers are not optional but embedded in market practice across all providers. Equally important is Ofgem's convening role. As we heard at the Insight Exchange, by bringing together suppliers, network operators, charities, consumer bodies and local organisations, the regulator fosters industry wide collaboration and encourages the development of best practice models, innovative trials and shared learning across the sector. If you have not been invited, then reach out so your voice can be heard and input added.

Energy suppliers and network operators play a pivotal frontline role in delivering direct assistance to vulnerable customers. They are responsible for implementing the *Priority Services Register (PSR)* and ensuring vulnerable households are identified and appropriately supported. Many suppliers now invest in dedicated vulnerability teams trained in mental health awareness, complex needs

handling and financial hardship. Beyond internal initiatives, companies increasingly collaborate with national and local organisations to create more holistic support pathways. They know they cannot be experts in everything and seek to manage the additional cost support services add to the bill payer. Examples include partnerships enabling energy advisers from charities and third parties to work directly with energy company teams. Utilising **existing referral routes** connecting customers with income maximisation support and hardship schemes offering discretionary credit to those struggling with prepayment meters. Energy companies are also strengthening data sharing and consent mechanisms, across and beyond the energy sector, enabling earlier identification of risks and more accurate targeting of help.

National and regional support organisations bring specialist expertise and consumer advocacy to the partnership landscape. Charities such as Citizens Advice, StepChange and other energy focused support bodies such as YES Energy Solutions CIC, NEF and Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE) operate as regionally based trusted intermediaries, helping customers understand energy bills, navigate disputes, manage debt and access government schemes. These **'wrap around services'** make sure there is no one left behind. Through helplines, digital tools and relevant and experiences casework services, they provide impartial advice at scale. Their role extends beyond direct support: they analyse systemic issues, publish insights on vulnerable customer experiences, influence policy and regulation and crucially share findings with each other. They are only in competition with poverty and bad service delivery. Increasingly, these organisations collaborate with utility companies on joint initiatives tailored to specific needs - whether supporting older people, individuals with disabilities, or those who face digital exclusion. Their national reach, combined with specialist knowledge, makes them essential partners in improving outcomes for vulnerable groups.

Yet it is often at the regional and local level where the most meaningful impact occurs. Community-based third-sector organisations - such as local charities, community hubs, social enterprises and voluntary groups - provide the relationship based support many vulnerable customers rely on. They offer combined services which 'wrap around' the householders' needs. They offer face to face advice, energy efficiency guidance, home visits and referrals across a broad network of services including foodbanks, housing charities,

social care and health providers. Their understanding of local contexts allows them to tailor services to cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic needs in ways that national organisations and energy companies cannot easily replicate. They also play a critical role in addressing digital exclusion, supporting individuals who may struggle to engage with self service or online customer service systems.

Several emerging partnership models illustrate the direction of travel for the sector. Integrated referral networks are linking suppliers, local authorities and other bodies into more coordinated **support pathways**. Fuel poverty alliances bring together councils, housing providers and voluntary organisations to deliver strategic interventions. Collaborative funding models enable suppliers and charities to jointly deliver projects targeted at specific vulnerable groups. Together, these models reflect a move towards a more connected, whole system approach where the purpose remains clear.

Challenges persist, including inconsistent data-sharing practices, **funding** constraints across parts of the third sector and regional disparities in support provision. Many bodies rely on the funding from the energy companies to deliver the support, in turn the energy companies rely on either a price determination or Ofgem strategies to get the 'green light' for action.

### **In conclusion**

Opportunities remain significant. Better interoperability between PSR registers, scaling successful local pilots, stronger integration with health and housing systems and the use of smart data to detect early indicators of vulnerability all offer powerful avenues for progress.

Supporting vulnerable customers in the energy sector requires a coordinated approach in which each partner's strengths are fully harnessed. By aligning societal need, regulatory oversight, energy company capability, national expertise, longer term funding and local insight, the sector can deliver more effective, compassionate and person centred support in an increasingly challenging landscape.