

**SCOPE**  
= Equality for  
disabled people



# Scope Utilities Membership (SUM)

Supporting disabled people  
2021 to 2022

May 2022

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# Utilities: the quick read

## 38,000 people

accessed our energy advice and support web pages. This content has been seen more than 66,000 page views.



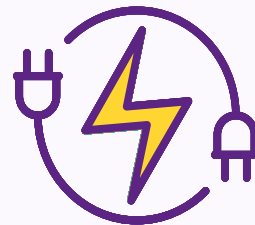
more than  
**4,144**

received advice from our dedicated **Disability Energy Support helpline.**



more than  
**6,600**

disabled people told us about their experiences with utilities



**3,592 people**

supported to sign up to the **Priority Services Register**



## £749,200

the total amount people collectively saved through **energy support advice.** Including £59,600 from grants and schemes. Also known as one-off larger efficiency measures.

## 10

research projects carried out to **better understand disabled people's energy and water needs.**



We reviewed the accessibility of **6 different network and supplier websites**

# Introduction

**The Scope Utilities Membership (SUM) is a community of utility companies. We are working together to make the utilities sector work better for disabled people.**

More than a third of disabled adults say that their impairment or condition has a significant effect on their energy costs. People with limited mobility, for example, might have to use more heating to keep warm. While others who use assistive technology need extra electricity to charge these items.<sup>1</sup>

We know that disabled people are more likely to have lower incomes and live in fuel poverty compared to non-disabled households. Households with a disabled person make up 38 per cent of all fuel poor households in England alone.<sup>2</sup> We also know that disabled people spend a higher proportion of their income on energy and water.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, the average UK household spent £1,214 a year on energy. But nearly a third (27 per cent) of disabled households spent more than £1,500 a year on energy. That's roughly 4.1 million homes. Of these, 790,000 spent over £2,500 a year on energy.<sup>3</sup>

When we launched the membership in 2019, our goal was

simple. To help reduce costs and improve utility services for disabled people. Tackling the everyday issues disabled people face paying for bills and accessing support services.

Since then, disabled people's energy costs have risen further. The combination of a pandemic, the energy crisis, and rising inflation has made life harder.

We're pleased with the progress we have made with Scope Utility Members and partners so far. This report highlights some of the outcomes of our work in the utility sector. Including the action we've taken to better support disabled people and bring about positive change.

<sup>1</sup> Out in the Cold policy report, Scope (2018)

<sup>2</sup> Fuel poverty tables Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2017)

<sup>3</sup> Analysis of the Living Costs and Food Survey, Office for National Statistics (2017)

# Context

**Global factors that have resulted in higher costs for disabled people.**

## Rising costs during a global energy crisis

While still dealing with a pandemic, the UK saw another unprecedented crisis in the last year, through rising global natural gas prices and UK fuel shortages. By January 2022, the wholesale price of gas was almost four times higher than what it was in early 2021.<sup>4</sup>

## The rising energy price cap

Driven by a record rise in global gas prices over the last 6 months, Ofgem announced a rise in its energy price cap in November 2021 and then again in April 2022. During this time, we saw average energy bills increase by 54 per cent.<sup>5</sup> The price cap is likely to rise again in October.

Our Disability Energy Support service has been inundated by disabled people seeking help with their energy.

The number of people accessing energy advice on the Scope website increased by 115% between December 2021 and January 2022.<sup>6</sup>

## The cost of living crisis

Disabled people are hit the hardest in the biggest cost of living crisis in a generation. Scope research shows the extent of living and energy costs on disabled people.<sup>7</sup>

- 76 per cent of disabled people have seen rising living costs and have had to cut household spending.
- Energy bills is the biggest increase in household cost for disabled adults.
- Disabled people are twice as likely to be unable to heat their homes and have a cold house, with 43 per cent saying they need to use more energy to meet their needs.
- Half of those experiencing increased costs over the past 3 months said that their mental health had worsened because of it.

<sup>4</sup> 'Energy prices and their effect on households' Office for National Statistics, February 2022

<sup>5</sup> 'Price cap to increase by £693 from April' press release, Ofgem, February 2022

<sup>6</sup> 'Disabled people hit the hardest in the biggest cost of living crisis in a generation' Scope press release, 8 February 2022

<sup>7</sup> Polling carried out by Opinium on behalf of Scope between in January 2021. Based on the responses of 1,005 disabled UK adults.

# Disability Energy Support service

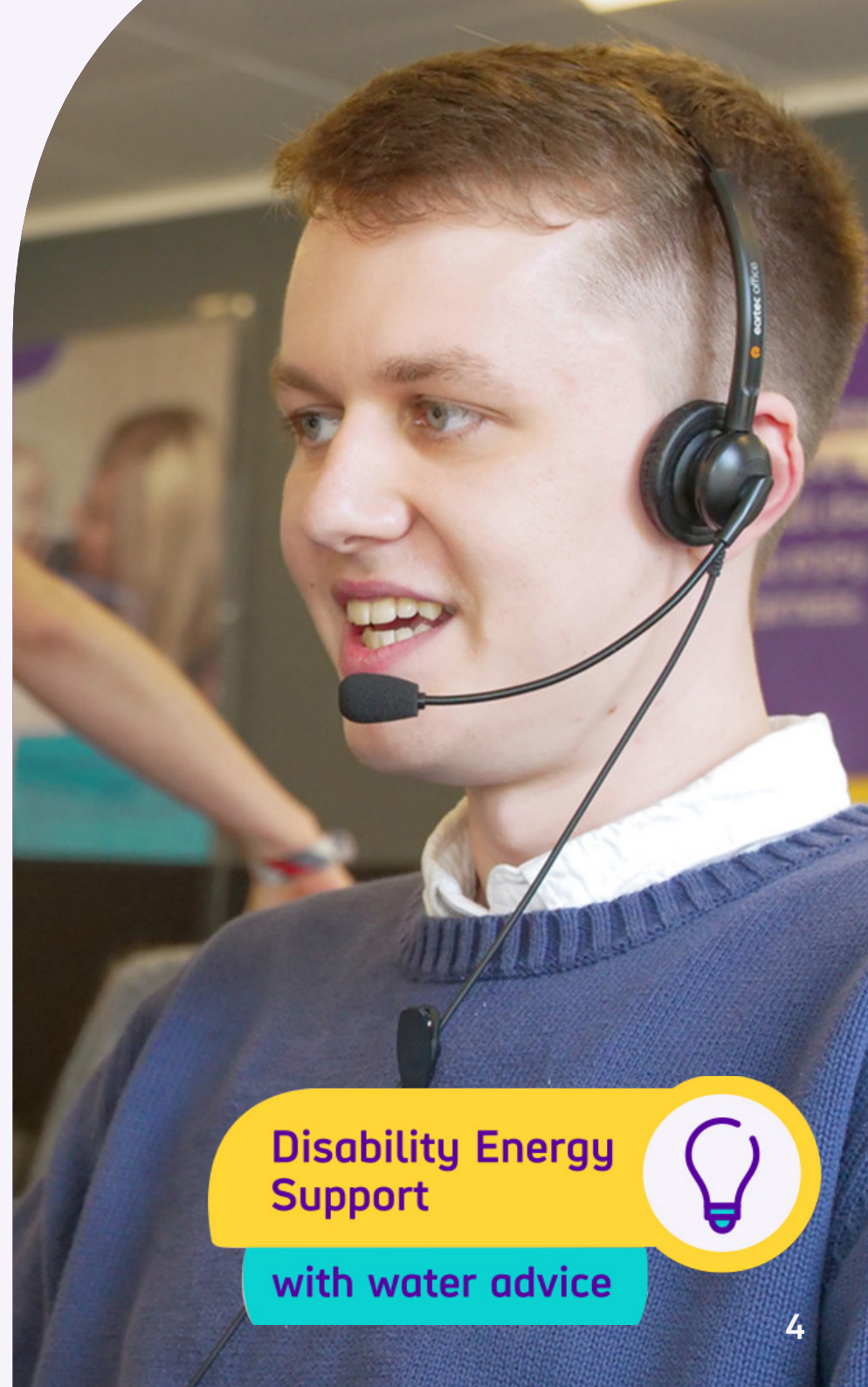
Scope launched the Disability Energy Support (DES) service in February 2021. A free, dedicated helpline for disabled people looking for energy and water advice and access to financial support.

The service includes offering people practical ways to reduce their energy and water costs.

Our expert advisers talk people through a range of topics like:

- signing up to the Priority Services Register
- getting the best tariff from their supplier
- how to apply for grants and schemes
- managing debt
- switching tariff or supplier
- installing a smart meters

All our advisors are highly trained and have completed City and Guilds level 3 in energy awareness.



**Disability Energy Support**



**with water advice**



## DES Funding

This service is funded through the Energy Redress Scheme. This is an initiative administered by the Energy Saving Trust.

In 2021, we have been able to improve our Disability Energy Support service by adding water advice. Including extra support, such as assistance completing application forms. This is thanks to additional funding from SGN, UK Power Networks and Anglian Water.

The success of our Autumn 2021 awareness campaign has led to us supporting hundreds more disabled people. As the demand for the service increased during the energy crisis, we increased our service team capacity.

In the first quarter of 2022, we are already seeing a rapid increase in the number of disabled people seeking help. We expect this to be an ongoing trend throughout the year.

## Outcomes

Between February 2021 and March 2022, we've:

- Given energy advice and support to **4,144 disabled people**.
- Helped disabled customers identify **more than £749,200 of collective savings**.<sup>8</sup>
- **£59,600** of those potential savings came from **grants and schemes**. Also known as one-off larger efficiency measures.
- Helped **3,592 people sign up to the Priority Services Register**.

In that time:

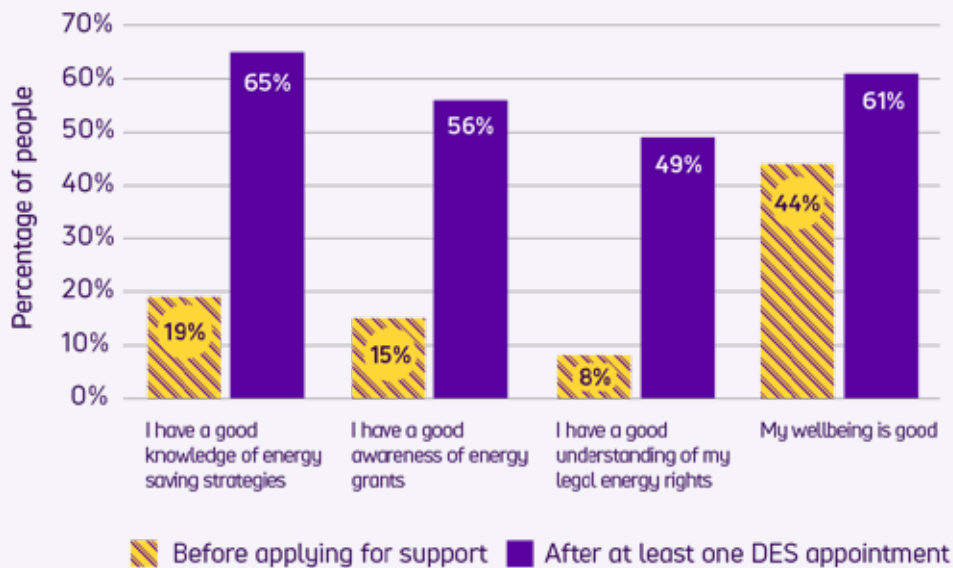
- Over **38,000 people accessed our online energy advice and support pages**.
- Our advice and support web content has seen **over 66,000 page views**.

<sup>8</sup> This figure takes into account total potential savings if customers follow recommendations set out during their DES appointment(s).



We complete wellbeing surveys with customers to measure the impact of the service. We compare how they are feeling before and after receiving support from us. We also compare customers' reported knowledge on energy issues and support available.

Feedback indicates that DES customers improved their knowledge and wellbeing after receiving support from us. Reporting better knowledge of energy saving strategies, energy grants and their legal energy rights.



9 Figures from December 2021

Before their appointment, just 44 per cent of customers reported having “good” wellbeing. After one appointment with our energy advisers, 61 per cent of customers said their wellbeing was “good”.<sup>9</sup>

These were the top 5 priority topics people most often chose when applying for support.

1. applications for grants and trusts (56 per cent)
2. how to be more energy efficient (22 per cent)
3. how to manage energy debt (21 per cent)
4. switching tariff or supplier (13 per cent)
5. changing meter (7 per cent)

**DES customers reported nearly a 40% increase in wellbeing after one DES appointment**



# Testimonials

“My advisor Phil was amazing, very knowledgeable, reassuring, and friendly. He put me at ease and totally understood where I was coming from. He took the time to listen as well as give great advice.”

## Richard

“It was great to have someone on the other end of the phone that was empathetic and understood my needs.”

## Arjun

“Very good, friendly, helpful. Supportive and understanding for disabled people like myself who are finding it difficult to get help from anywhere else.”

## Pauline

“[My advisor] Lucy was easy to communicate with, clear, friendly, knowledgeable and spent time listening.”

## Katie

“Very good and friendly. They helped me get a gas voucher to keep me warm and get a hot bath. Being a vulnerable and disabled person, without their help I'd be stuck without heating.”

## Michael

“The advisors I've spoken to are brilliant. So helpful, understanding and know their stuff.”

## Simon

## Susan's story

Susan, from Cornwall, contacted Scope concerned about her rising energy costs. Her daughter has a functional neurological disorder and is a wheelchair user. To support her daughter at home, Susan had a stair lift and electric door fitted.

During the appointment, our Disability Energy Support adviser listened. They asked a series of questions to better understand Susan's household energy use. As well as her daughter's specific energy needs around equipment and heating.

The advisor talked Susan through the benefits of signing up to the Priority Services Register. Including getting priority service in case of power cuts. They also talked through practical ways Susan could save energy and money day to day.

Scope supported Susan in switching tariffs with her current energy supplier. Reducing her gas and electricity bills by £63 per month and more than £756 per year.

Susan herself said that her energy adviser “worked miracles”. Taking one of her biggest stresses and helping her deal with it.

# Our work with SUM members

Our work with suppliers and network companies builds on the social model of disability. This says that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference

These barriers can prevent disabled people from getting the support they deserve. For example, when paying for bills and receiving priority support services.

We are working with organisations to remove these barriers. Finding ways to make utility services more inclusive and accessible. We do this by:

- carrying out research to better understand disabled people's energy needs
- sharing insight with companies so they can design better services for all customers
- raising awareness of barriers through industry events and webinars



# Research

We carried out several research projects to better understand people's energy needs. This research has given organisations gain up-to-date insights following the pandemic and subsequent energy crisis. Helping organisations identify ways to improve their services.

## The pandemic

We asked people about their experiences with utilities during the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> SUM members contributed to this research to learn more about their customers.

Disabled people reported a larger increase in their utility usage during lockdown compared to non-disabled people. They were also more likely to worry about increased costs during this period.

During this time, disabled people said they were most worried about:

1. increased costs (46 per cent)
2. increased usage (34 per cent)
3. having to go without, or ration, their energy usage (27 per cent)

## Improving communication

When asked how suppliers can improve their communication, people said by:

- checking accessibility requirements
- checking preferred communication method
- improving waiting times
- offering a more personalised customer service

<sup>10</sup> Research by the Scope Research Panel and Censuswide (November 2021). The data used a sample that was representative of the general UK population. It compared disabled responses with non-disabled responses.

## Switching energy suppliers

Changing energy supplier should be easy. When accessibility barriers get in the way, this can prevent people from doing so.

Scope worked with Accenture and the Data Communications Centre (DCC) to find out more about people's experiences switching energy suppliers.<sup>11</sup>

The biggest motivators for changing supplier are to reduce costs. People told us their top 3 reasons for switching were:

1. to save money (28 per cent)
2. to get a better deal (19 per cent)
3. to avoid increased costs from their existing supplier (15 per cent)

The research found that barriers may be excluding some disabled customers from the best energy deals. Barriers including inaccessible online switching services. As well as inaccessible information around switching and its benefits.

<sup>11</sup> Surveys by Scope crowdsourcing data, carried out with Accenture and DCC Communications Centre. (February 2021)

## Support during the switching process

Respondents said the following changes would make the process of switching suppliers easier:

- creating more usable and accessible channels for customers to switch suppliers
- simplifying language and terminology used in communications
- providing alternative contact methods. For example, by having phone, webchat and email as options
- finding alternative ways to define customer needs for a more personalised service

The current energy crisis has shifted people's focus from the switching process to other more immediate issues. However, these learnings can apply to customer services and interactions more broadly. These recommendations will advise a future national initiative to make switching energy supplier easier.

## The Priority Services Register

The Priority Services Register (PSR) is intended to help customers who may need extra support. But our research shows that awareness of the scheme is lacking.

Our survey with Accenture and the Data Communications Centre (DCC) revealed that:

- 42 per cent of disabled people said they didn't know if they were currently eligible to be on the register
- 57 per cent of disabled people said they had not heard of the register before taking the survey

In separate research carried out with UK Power Networks and Accenture, we surveyed people from London boroughs<sup>12</sup>. In this survey:

- 61 per cent told us they weren't aware of the benefits of signing up to the register
- More than half (54 per cent) said that clearer communication around the register's benefits and the support available would encourage them to sign up.

Many said they were happy for suppliers to know about their disability, if it meant they could access better service and support.

<sup>12</sup> Surveys by Scope crowdsourcing data, carried out with Accenture and UK Power Networks. (February 2021).



Scope's recommendations have helped us improve our priority services for disabled customers. Through research, we could better understand our customers needs when it comes to getting extra support. Through testing, we identified 12 potential barriers to sign-up. We have since made changes to the accessibility of our website. Not just by improving our Priority Services pages, but also the forms to register.

Our ongoing partnership with Scope has helped raise awareness of our priority services. This, alongside targeted messaging through a range of channels, has increased the number of disabled customers registering for support."

**(Giulia Privitera** Social Sustainability Strategy and Programme Manager, UK Power Networks)

## Water needs in times of crisis

We carried out research with Anglian Water to find out more about people's experience with their water supply.<sup>13</sup> Particularly in emergencies, for example when a pipe bursts or the water supply gets cut off.

- Many said that drinking water regularly was essential to manage their condition.
- 71 per cent of people said it would take less than 4 hours to impact their impairment or condition.
- People who have kidney and bowel medical conditions critically rely on having a fresh, regular water supply.
- Some people need a constant water supply to clean equipment and to take medication several times a day.

<sup>13</sup> Surveys by Scope crowdsourcing data, carried out with Anglian Water. (October 2020)





At Anglian Water, we want to help those customers who need support paying their water bills. Through SUM, we've learned how the complexities of the benefits system affect our disabled customers. This has helped us improve our services to meet their needs. After consulting with Scope, we've made changes to how we support customers with Disability Premiums. This is a change that will ultimately benefit more of our disabled customers."

**(Samantha Ross** Customer ODI Strategy Manager, Anglian Water)

## Spotlight on: Anglian Water Improving priority services for customers

Anglian Water announced the following changes as a result of our work together.

- Increasing the number of customers on the Priority Services Register by 125 per cent.<sup>14</sup>
- Launching a new Priority Service Team specifically for vulnerable customers. The team manages a free, dedicated telephone helpline for customer queries and support.
- Launching an 'On My Way' service with bookable time slots and live updates for engineer visits. Helping customers know when to expect a visit and plan around it.
- Giving customers advanced notice of water supply disruption in their area by text.

14 Percentage increase from August 2020 to March 2022



# Improving the customer experience

An important aim of our work with the SUM is to improve the disabled customer experience. By removing accessibility barriers and improving staff awareness of disability.

## Accessibility

When products and services are accessible, disabled people can live more independent lives. Scope has been working with SUM partners to improve their online services. Through accessibility testing, consultancy, and training.

We reviewed the accessibility of several energy and water supplier websites, including:

- **Anglian Water**
- **Bristol Water**
- **Electricity Northwest**
- **SGN**
- **Together Energy**
- **UK Power Networks**

Staff also attended content accessibility training sessions to improve their communications.

We worked with Bristol and Wessex Water to review the accessibility of their print bills. This was to identify improvements they could make to the design and language. For example, using plain English in their communications.

We helped Electricity North West overhaul the accessibility of their online services. Looking at 6 different customer journeys, highlighting accessibility barriers and offering recommendations.

“

“It’s vital that we give staff the awareness and understanding they need to respond to customers’ needs. We are trying to bring our colleagues closer to our customers. By building their understanding and providing a better service.” **(Maureen McIntosh, Head of Customer Experience SGN)**

## Spotlight on: Together Energy

### Making online services more accessible

Together Energy introduced the following changes to their website as a result of our accessibility work:

- New readability criteria for all written content.
- Testing colour contrast against Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) criteria. Improving the experience for low vision and colour deficient users.
- Using semantic headers for all web page content. Improving usability and screen reader accessibility.
- Reviewing and changing link text best practice. Ensuring links reflect the content they are linking to and improving usability.

Together Energy applied these changes throughout their website. Including core customer journeys such as their Priority Service Register sign-up page.

After launching its priority services campaign, they reported improved customer engagement. With the number of priority service customers going from 4% to 23% within 12 months.

“

Scope's Utilities Membership offers a unique cross-industry forum. To influence regulatory policy, share best practice and learn from Scope's expert knowledge.

This is important to us, as a challenger energy supplier looking to differentiate ourselves by offering better service to vulnerable customers. Scope has already given us invaluable advice on how we can make our website more accessible. We are currently rolling these recommendations out. Being one of the founding members of SUM has placed us in a strong position to meet Energy UK's Vulnerability Commitment.”

(Gavin Baillie, Director of Regulation and Consumer Vulnerability, Together Energy Networks)

## Spotlight on: Electricity North West

### Increasing investment in web accessibility

Electricity North West wanted to see how disabled customers experienced their online services. They worked with Scope's Research Panel to gather these insights.

Research Panel members used their lived experience to feed back on website customer journeys. They also reviewed the accessibility of Electricity North West's communications, website content and Interactive Voice Response (IVR) services.

As a result, Electricity North West has increased investment in its digital services. An overhaul of the accessibility and design of their online offering is taking place. The aim will be to remove barriers and make all their communication channels more accessible.

“

Scope has delivered meaningful insights into our customers' needs and challenges. As one research participant put it, “accessibility is about inclusivity, not disability”.

Participants made us aware of things in user testing that we simply hadn't spotted before. We are already using these insights to improve the accessibility of our services. Enabling us to represent disabled people's voices better, both in our decision-making and planning. These are changes that will benefit our customers now and into the future.”

**(Ella Stafford, Customer Experience Manager, Electricity North West)**

## Disability awareness training

Our work with utility companies includes improving staff awareness of disabled people. We have supported a number of partner organisations with social model training.

Scope's Disability Employment Specialist delivers inclusive workplace training. It includes practical advice for customer service staff and colleagues to better understand:

- the physical, digital, and societal barriers that disabled people experience
- the Equality Act 2010 and which parts are important to disability equality
- how to work with and manage disabled colleagues
- how to better meet the needs of disabled customers

This training also covers how to best support disabled employees within their own organisation.

Staff reported better understanding the needs of disabled customers as a result.

“

The training was interactive and really enjoyable. A great achievement and certainly something our advisors will have learnt a lot from.”

**(Simon Curtis, Customer Services Training Development and Compliance Manager, UK Power Networks)**

“

It's vital for organisations like UK Power Networks to improve employee awareness and understanding of disability. That way, we can tailor our services and respond to the needs of our customers better. It's essential for improving their confidence so that they can provide the best possible service.”

**(Giulia Privitera, Social Sustainability Strategy and Programme Manager, UK Power Networks)**

# Raising awareness and sharing best practice

Scope has presented at several industry events to amplify disabled people's voices. Including:

- **Utility Week Consumer Vulnerability and Debt Conference** in June 2021.
- **Ofwat's 'Listen, Care, Share' roundtable event** in July 2021. Sharing insight on the challenges disabled people face with their water suppliers.

Scope's presence at the following events with SUM partners has enabled us to share our research and insight to increase awareness of the barriers disabled people face in the sector:

- **a SUM partnership webinar** in February 2021, where Scope and SUM members shared learnings and best practice with utility partners across the industry. Here we launched our research findings from the pandemic.<sup>15</sup>
- **a co-hosted webinar with Energy UK and DES-funding members** in November 2021. Together with SGN, UK Power Networks and Anglian Water we promoted our energy and water advice service.

<sup>15</sup> ['Coronavirus, energy suppliers and disabled people'](#) policy report, Scope (February 2021)



## From our members and partners

“Working with Scope has really helped our call centre staff feel more confident in supporting disabled customers. The ‘End the Awkward’ training was well received, with employees asking for more sessions. It’s a fantastic reflection on the quality and engagement of the programme.” **(Michael Horwood, Public Affairs Manager, UK Power Networks)**

“We’re proud to be a founding member of the Scope Utilities Membership. Working in partnership with Scope to help us better serve our disabled customers. With its pioneering, innovative approach to improving the customer experience for disabled people. It’s been a pleasure working with such a collaborative and innovative charity, leading the way to deliver impactful change.” **(Kerry Potter, Group Social Impact and Vulnerability Manager, SGN)**

“Though we’re new to the membership, we’re already seeing the benefits. Scope is helping us to better understand how we can support our disabled customers and staff. With the cost-of-living crisis making things harder for people, it’s become even more critical. We’re committed to working with Scope to make the utilities sector work better for disabled people.” **(Elizabeth Warwick, Stakeholder Engagement Manager, Wales & West Utilities)**

“Working with Scope this year has allowed us to identify areas where we can do better to serve all our customers. And ensure they receive the best service possible. The accessibility training was great. It was brought to life by the first-hand examples of improvements we could make. It really opened our minds to the challenges people, and in turn our customers, face. The training was clear, concise, interactive and totally recommended...”

We are committed to providing accessible content for all our customers. Our partnership with Scope is allowing us to do just that. We recommend the content accessibility training to any organisation that cares about delivering inclusive customer experiences.” **(Stephanie Martin, Customer Experience Project Manager, Bristol Water)**

“South East Water is really excited to join the Scope Utilities Membership. As an organisation, we’re committed to providing inclusive services to our customers. Joining the membership gives us the opportunity to do just that. Working with a highly-respected organisation that has significant experience of disability. It also provides a great forum to drive innovation in this area moving forward. We’ve already started seeing the value of that support. Adding value to our strategic thinking and delivery plans.” **(Andy Clowes, Head of Customer Experience and Strategy, South East Water)**

# Afterword

It's been a difficult year for utility customers. But not everyone has been affected equally. Our research tells us that, again, disabled people have been hit the hardest. One of our top focus areas this year is the impact of the cost of living crisis on disabled people, and energy price rises are a big part of that.

To tackle this, Scope remains committed to its work with SUM members. We want to partner with the wider network of utility companies, suppliers, and regulators to see change.

This support is essential. Not just in the aftermath of a pandemic, but in dealing with the rising energy costs ahead and beyond.

At the same time, Scope's policy team has been influencing change from the government. Working with Ofgem and the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy on long-term regulatory change.

Through our policy work, we've informed government discussions on a range of issues affecting disabled people. We gave recommendations on the Warm Home discount and the energy price cap. We've joined talks to make sure schemes, like the Energy Company Obligation, work for disabled people.

We continue to make sure that disabled people's voices are heard. We gave insights that influenced 26 suppliers to sign up to new commitments to help customers over the winter. Including pledges like identifying and prioritising customers who may need additional support.

We are grateful to the members that have helped fund our Disability Energy Support service; SGN, UK Power Networks and Anglian Water. Allowing us to increase the energy service support and offer free water advice to disabled customers. Since launch, this service has helped over 4,000 people identify how they can save more than £749,200 on their annual utility bills.

It's been great to see the continued achievements of the Scope Utilities Membership throughout the year. But of course, there's more work to be done.

There has never been a more important time to include disabled people in energy and water discussions. With your support, we can achieve a fairer energy and water system for disabled people.

**Mark Hodgkinson**  
Chief Executive



# Thank you to our members and partners





# Glossary

Energy and water grants and schemes, including policy and regulatory programmes designed to support vulnerable customers.

## Cold Weather Payment

Government scheme that offers a £25 payment for every 7 days of very cold weather. Available to people on certain benefits between November and March.

## [Cold Weather Payment \(GOV.UK\)](#)

## The Priority Services Register

People eligible for the Priority Services Register (PSR) can receive extra help. From their energy or water suppliers and their electricity and gas networks. Offering non-financial support, like:

- priority service in case of an emergency (for example, in the event of a gas, electricity or water supply interruption)
- advanced notice of planned electricity or gas interruptions
- providing bottled water when the water supply is interrupted
- accessible billing information in alternative formats (large print or Braille, for example)
- help with meter readings

## [Priority Services Register \(Ofgem\)](#)

## Warm Home Discount scheme

Government scheme offering people a £140 payment towards their electricity bills. This is available between October and March to people:

- on Pension Credit
- or in low-income households.

## [Warm Home Discount Scheme \(GOV.UK\)](#)

## WaterSure tariff

Scheme to help people with water meters pay for their water bills. Eligible customers will have their bills capped. This means they pay no more than the average household bill for that area. Even if they use more than the average amount of water.

## [WaterSure tariffs \(Citizens Advice\)](#)

## Winter Fuel Payment

Government support scheme to help people pay their winter heating bills. Offers people who were born on or before 26 September 1955 a one-off, annual payment to support with bills.

## [Winter Fuel Payment \(GOV.UK\)](#)

# Join the Scope Utilities Membership

**Improve the way the utility sector works for disabled people and their families.**

By signing up, your organisation will have the opportunity to:

- test your services with the Scope Research Panel
- hear about lived experiences from disabled people
- evaluate the accessibility of your core customer journeys
- join our social model and disability awareness training
- attend roundtables and seminars with industry experts
- showcase accessibility learnings and best practice
- champion change across the utilities sector and beyond
- share insights to inform government and regulatory standards

For more information on becoming a member, please email: [utilities@scope.org.uk](mailto:utilities@scope.org.uk)

We base annual membership cost on the size of your organisation and customer base.

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