



21 January 2022

Jonathan Brearley
Chief Executive
Ofgem
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HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Dear Jonathan

Re: Ofgem's review into the networks' response to Storm Arwen

I am writing with my feedback on the performance of the network operators in the wake of Storm Arwen, in light of the review being conducted by Ofgem. I appreciate this review is internal and has not invited public comment, however I wanted to offer my feedback gained through my extensive dealings with the network operators since Storm Arwen, and on working on behalf of my constituents and the feedback they have given me.

There are lessons to be learned by other bodies with an interest or role to play in the aftermath of the Storm, including Northumberland County Council, Northumbria Water Group and the local resilience forum, however, this review is into the performance of the network operators, so I will limit my comments to them.

The damage wrought by Storm Arwen across my constituency, as well as the county of Northumberland and other areas of the north east was unprecedented in my lifetime. The challenges faced by the network operators to assess the damage, prioritise repairs and orchestrate an enormous number of repairs in difficult weather conditions cannot be overstated. The task they faced was herculean and the efforts of the electrical engineers was incredible. I met many of the teams, all of whom were working in conditions which I would suggest might otherwise be deemed too dangerous, who were working incredibly hard to reconnect our communities.

However, there are resilience lessons to be learned from Storm Arwen. My constituency covers a vast (more than 1,000 square mile) area of rural Northumberland. A considerable number of those who were without power live in areas of poor or no mobile telephone signal. Many are elderly or have farms and livestock to support. We discovered that many farmsteads who use pumps for water from boreholes for their livestock were not known to Northern PowerGrid and no mitigations were possible at pace.

Ensuring these most rural constituents can be reconnected at pace, and that back-up power is available as quickly as possible, should be a focus for learning lessons for the future.

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*I send a regular e-newsletter to keep residents informed of the work I do in Parliament and locally.
To receive it email "subscribe" to annemarie.trevelyan.mp@parliament.uk.*

The immediate aftermath of the storm

The primary complaint I received from constituents about both major network operators, Northern Powergrid and Scottish Power, was the inability to communicate with the DNOs that they had been affected by a power loss.

On a personal level, I had the pylon which brought power to my home come down across my garden, leaving a live cable at ground level. I spent over 8 hours on the phone, over 2 days, trying to get through to Northern Powergrid to report this highly dangerous situation. Once I managed to report it, (on day 3), it took a further 4 days before the cabling was made safe. I know my constituents had similar experiences, many gave up, often because their mobile phones could not be recharged), and some had no means of contacting their operator, as they had been switched to VOIP landline network which was rendered ineffective because of the power cut.

Having visited Northern PowerGrid's call centre with Greg Hands in the days following the Storm, I know staff there were working as hard as they could, but the volumes of people trying to report their power loss or seek information meant they were utterly overwhelmed, even with help from other network operators, and customers were left frustrated and extremely concerned that they were not even able to report their power loss, let alone discover when they might be reconnected.

Communication about repairs

Inadequate and inaccurate communication from both networks is the primary complaint I have received. There was a level of appreciation among constituents I have spoken to that they understood the size of the task and the nature of work involved and understood they may have a wait before being reconnected. However, many were given inaccurate information regarding reconnections dates either by telephone or via the operator websites.

This not only left people angry and frustrated, but meant they were unable to take mitigation. Many people reported to me that, had they known they would be without power for a number of days, they would have sought alternative accommodation, but were repeatedly told they were about to be reconnected, incorrectly as it transpired.

As the local Member of Parliament, constituents contacted me, not unreasonably believing I might have better luck contacting the operators to give them the information they and I craved. That was eventually the case, but neither operator contacted me themselves. My team and I struggled to find contact details for the senior teams of the operators. Both companies have "stakeholder relations" staff, who had declined to contact major stakeholders, including local MPs, in the wake of Storm Arwen. After several days, my team and I – still without power ourselves – were able to make contact, and regular meetings were established. This enabled me to send out daily update emails and ensure the information I now had was on my own website and social media channels.

At one point, I think 9th December 2021, Northern Powergrid closed their telephone lines altogether, leaving residents unable to contact them on this matter. This was not communicated to me in advance and caused considerable concern for a number of residents. When my team raised it with Northern Powergrid, they received a standardised email in return, directing them to the company's complaints procedure.



Communication about reimbursement and alternative accommodation

Another area in which communication was lacking was that of reimbursement for expenses resulting from the loss of power, including alternative accommodation, food, water, and generators. Customers were often given conflicting advice about whether they could claim the costs of these items. On 28th November, I received a commitment from Northern Powergrid that customers would be reimbursed if they kept proof of purchase and was able to communicate that to those people I was in contact with, and place that information on my own website.

My team and I were also able to report in cases of vulnerable customers, so the operators could contact them to offer them alternative accommodation or provide them with generators. Once in place, this system seemed to work well, however I remain concerned that it required the MP to connect these vulnerable people with the operators.

Many residents were unaware that operators could source generators for communities and more vulnerable residents or would reimburse them if they sourced them independently. Complaints did not stop once generators were in place, as many reported to me that generators ran out of fuel almost right away, some were not powerful enough for the requirements, some were faulty and others were in the wrong location. Some residents remain on generators whilst longer term repairs are carried out.

Priority Services Register

The people of Northumberland are a resilient bunch, many of whom have spent their entire lives in remote locations, with limited contact, and many are effectively cut off each winter if snow closes their access roads. However, I was very worried about some communities, where elderly or otherwise vulnerable residents were without power for many days. On more than one occasion I was contacted by people who had very vulnerable family members (for example who may be reliant on refrigerated medication, or electrically-powered medical machinery) who had not come forward themselves to seek assistance. Once I was aware of them, I was able to put them in touch with Northumberland County Council's welfare teams, who were incredibly responsive. However, I have identified two issues with the Priority Services Register:

1. Lack of awareness that such a Register exists, and who might be eligible to be on it. The criteria are much wider than many had thought;
2. The Register did not seem to work in prioritising those customers already on it for repairs or welfare checks. I was alarmed by the number of residents who contacted me having been without power, in some cases for over a week, who had not heard from their operator, despite being on the Priority Services Register.

I have received enough messages from constituents expressing the same concern – that despite being on the PSR they received no contact from their operator despite having been without power for days – that the only conclusion I can draw is that the Register is not being used properly if being placed on it cannot guarantee any service at all in the aftermath of a power cut, let alone a priority service. This is extremely concerning and something I would encourage you to investigate further.

Compensation

The issuing of compensation is ongoing, but began over a month ago, which is enough time for me to provide some initial thoughts on how the process has been implemented. I ran surveys on my website to seek additional feedback from constituents on their thoughts on the compensation schemes, which also informs my views.

I spoke to both Northern Powergrid and Scottish Power about their respective schemes, which are similar in nature, being bound by the same statutory amounts dictated by the Guaranteed Standard of Service. SP chose to award customers an additional £150 per household as a goodwill payment, which caused understandable upset with neighbouring Northern Powergrid customers.

Both operators urged customers to wait to receive a cheque in the post. Scottish Power told customers they would have received their cheque by 21 December 2021, enabling those who had not received one by that date to know they ought to contact the company. Northern Powergrid declined to set a similar date, which caused additional frustration among customers.

Whilst a lot of people who took part in my surveys reported they did receive a cheque in a timely manner, and for the correct amount, many have not. I have several criticisms of the handling of the compensation schemes that could hopefully ensure similar issues are avoided in the future:

1. **Data.** Both operators were very confident in discussions with me prior to the compensation schemes commencing, that they would run relatively smoothly. My primary concern was their lack of coherent datasets for customers. The network operators have little contact with the end consumer, and the figures they cited to me of the number of properties they believed had been without power, sounded too low given what I knew of the scale of the outage. As a result, large numbers of customers reported they did not receive a cheque or a letter seeking further information. I received reports of entire hamlets being missed for compensation, difficulties in awarding compensation to park home residents, who pay for utilities via the park home (these issues were resolved by the operators). Several people who completed the survey told me they only knew they might be entitled to compensation, and a rough idea of the amount, because I had publicised it. Some residents who were off power for over 10 days were simply not on the operators' radar and only knew they might be entitled to receive compensation because a neighbour had received my survey and alerted them.
2. **Incorrect compensation amount.** 46% of respondents to my Northern Powergrid survey (Appendix 1) reported they received a cheque for the correct amount, which is excellent, however, 32% did not, and a further 22% were simply unsure if the amount they received was correct. 56% of respondents to my Scottish Power survey (Appendix 2) reported they received the correct amount, 33% did not, and 11% didn't know. I continue to receive several emails per day from constituents seeking my help to either seek any compensation from the operators, or to correct the amount they initially received. Many report having made many phone calls and sent emails to the provided email address with no response. My own team has found answers from the senior team in dealing with these cases to be somewhat hit and miss, with "simple" cases being rectified quickly, and others remaining



unresolved. Ultimately it is disappointing that customers are not able to illicit a reply from the dedicated compensation helpline and email address that they feel they have no option but to ask for my intervention.

3. **Communication.** Both operators, but Northern Powergrid in particular – and that may well be because they have a larger number of affected customers, are incredibly hard to contact. Residents have reported not receiving a letter from their operator despite having been off power, inability to receive a reply via email, inability to get through on the telephone, and being given the incorrect information if they do get through (for example being told they were a “low voltage” customer, so less of a priority). It is disappointing that having accepted there were issues with communications with customers in the immediate aftermath of the storm, the compensation scheme has also been mired in similar issues.

It is my view that the number of dissatisfied customers could be significantly reduced by improving data held on customers and having more efficient systems in place to identify who was without supply and for how long. I continue to be concerned that there remain customers who will be entitled to receive compensation who are simply unaware of the fact, as the operators have no way of identifying them.

Resilience of the network

I am not an engineer or emergency planner, however, part of the reason so many homes and businesses were without power for an extended time was the significant amount of damage caused to both poles and substations. In rural Northumberland, placing poles near trees cannot be avoided everywhere, but as new investments are made, I hope consideration could be made to those most at risk is a priority in the wake of a storm.

Similarly, many substations were badly damaged by fallen trees. I am not familiar with any requirements on operators to carry out surveys of trees which might threaten the integrity of the network, or if this was routinely carried out in areas of dense tree population.

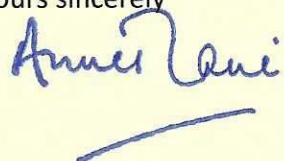
The effects of Storm Arwen were worsened by a loss of water supply in many areas, as a result in loss of supply to pumps. Back up supply must be considered a key priority in future resilience planning, although I appreciate that does not fall within the remit of this review.

Finally, alongside proper examination of the failure of the Priority Services Register of customers to operate as it should, attention should also be paid to ensuring vital community facilities – such as GP surgeries, pharmacies, schools etc, have back up power facilities and greater awareness within communities of which locations might have a backup supply should another large-scale outage occur.

In conclusion, the effects of Storm Arwen were devastating to our rural communities, but the impact of the Storm was worsened and lengthened by failures in communications and resilience by the network operators.

I hope the areas I have highlighted in this response are addressed in the Ofgem review and look forward to hearing from your regarding its conclusions.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Annee Lani". Below the signature is a single horizontal line.