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Heat networks vulnerable customers policy

Purpose and scope

This policy outlines the approach that Sutton Housing Society (SHS) takes to support heat network customers (residents) in vulnerable situations.

This policy sets out:

1. What a heat network customer in a vulnerable situation is
2. How to identify customers in vulnerable situations
3. What support is available.

This policy applies to all residents living in our homes with communal heating systems. These are located at the following schemes for older people:

- Dorothy Pettingell House
- Griffiths Close
- Margaret House
- Norman House
- Old Brewery House
- Thomas House
- Trickett House

The policy also sets out our approach to debt recovery for heat network customers.

Definition

Sutton Housing Society aligns their definition of a “vulnerable customer”, for heat network purposes, with Ofgem’s definition, which is:

Any customer who identifies themselves, or a permanent resident of a customer’s home, as being at the time of identification:

- *significantly less able than a typical consumer of energy to protect or represent his or her interests in the energy market and/or;*
- *significantly more likely than a typical consumer to suffer detriment, or that detriment is likely to be more substantial*

This could be someone who is:

- *chronically ill*
- *mentally or physically disabled or having a hearing or visual impairment*

- *of pensionable age*
- *under the age of 5 years old*
- *suffering severe financial insecurity [and/or bereavement]*

We will consider additional factors such as age, health, disability, low income, severe financial insecurity, digital exclusion and bereavement in defining whether or not a customer is in a vulnerable situation.

Key matters

1 Identifying customers in vulnerable circumstances

We will seek to identify residents in vulnerable situations and will provide clear information about what support is available to them. Vulnerability is not static or fixed. A person can become vulnerable because of their characteristics, circumstances or the market, all of which can change. Some people may become vulnerable for a period of time due to their changing circumstances.

SHS maintains a vulnerable customers / priority persons register; this is monitored and updated by the Housing Managers, taking account of both the Ofgem definition outlined above and our separate safeguarding vulnerable adults policy.

2 Registering as a vulnerable customer

We will communicate with all residents living in homes with a heat network about the support that can be offered to them, including but not limited to the following:

- Initial tenancy sign up
- Heat Supply Agreements
- Sutton Housing Society's website
- Annual heat network information sheet issued with rent changes each year (from March 2027).

Residents with heat networks can register themselves (or family members) as a vulnerable person for the purpose of receiving priority services in the event of heat network outages. SHS employees are also responsible for identifying residents and making sure relevant support is available to them.

For further details about the Priority Services Register, how to apply and what support is available to you, please contact hello@shsoc.org.uk or speak with your Housing Manager.

3 Support for vulnerable customers

There are different levels of support that residents may need, depending on their specific circumstances; not all vulnerabilities require the same response.

These can be considered in three main categories: the table below shows the intervention points for each, and what our responsibilities are:

Residents vulnerable to the cold	Residents with additional communication requirements	Residents with financial difficulties
- Residents are not placed in homes which are susceptible to the cold e.g. poor insulation, damp issues etc. (Any concerns relating to damp, insulation etc will receive speedy inspections and quick resolution as per our repairs policy). - Residents heat will never be suspended for non-payment. - Alternative heating will be arranged if a planned interruption is due to take longer than 6 hours.	- Front-line colleagues will receive training in communicating with customers in vulnerable situations. - Communications are tailored to individual circumstances e.g. large print formats, letter, email, WhatsApp etc. - Residents will not be excluded who do not have access to digital technology.	- Support will be provided, on request, to help residents understand their heat consumption and if necessary, how they might reduce this consumption. - Additional support will be offered to make payments if required. - Support will be provided to help residents understand any debt and how this has occurred. - Information will be provided regarding income maximisation, such as cold weather payment, winter fuel payment etc. - Repayment plans will be arranged to manage any rent / service charge debt.

4 Roles and responsibilities

SHS ensures that front-line colleagues can highlight / identify vulnerable residents. The Housing Managers will review and monitor the priority services register of vulnerable heat network residents on a regular basis, usually quarterly, and when changes occur.

The property team will work with housing colleagues to ensure that when heat network outages occur, vulnerable residents are aware, with suitable arrangements in place. We will also ensure that our heat network contractor understands the nature of the homes and vulnerabilities and responds to outages within agreed timescales.

5 Training

We will ensure all relevant colleagues receive training in respect of heat networks and vulnerable residents and that they:

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- Can deal sensitively with the needs of the person they are visiting
 - Understand how a cold home can affect someone's health, and how to spot if someone is vulnerable to the cold and the risks they are facing
 - Are aware of local services designated to address these problems and understand how to refer someone for help.

6 Review of this policy

As this is a new policy and as Ofgem expectations / regulations are not yet fully in place, this policy will be reviewed annually.