



## **New essential workers: Lockdown, 'new normal' & customer service**

**APPG on Customer Service meeting, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

**This meeting was a virtual meeting, held on the Zoom platform**

In attendance:

- Philip Davies MP, Chair
- Chris Evans MP, Co-Chair
- Carolyn Harris MP, Officer
- Andrew Lewer MP, Officer
- Margaret Ferrier MP (SNP) (Shadow SNP Spokesperson for Manufacturing)
- Selaine Saxby MP (Conservative)
- Lord Whitty (Labour)
- Andy Francis – Head of Stores Wales, Merseyside & West Midlands at Boots UK
- Joanna Causon – Chief Executive at the Institute of Customer Service
- Joanne Cairns – Deputy Head of Research & Economics at USDAW
- John Barnett – Director of Operations at npower
- Jonathan Cowie – Chief Operating Officer at Vivid Homes

Philip Davies MP opened the session by thanking all in attendance and stated that it was necessary to hold an AGM.

- Philip Davies MP and Chris Evans MP both continue in their role as Chair and Co-Chair respectively.
- For the election of officers, after no alternative nominations were made, Parliamentarians in attendance were issued an email with links allowing them to vote which they used to elect Andrew Lewer MP and Carolyn Harris MP as officers on the APPG.
- Philip Davies MP then opened the floor for Jo Causon, Chief Executive of the Institute of Customer Service, to explain more about the role of the Institute.

### **Contributions from invited speakers**

#### **Jo Causon, Chief Executive of The Institute of Customer Service:**

- Jo welcomed guests and explained that the Institute is the secretariat for this APPG.
- Thanked guests, the Co-Chairs, and the Officers for their patience and support in setting up the APPG in its virtual format.
- Said the subject of essential workers has never been more important and that she would later share the Institute's key findings.

#### **Philip Davies MP**

- Thanked Jo and explained the meeting's focus is on new essential workers, the Covid-19 lockdown, and how customer service fits into that picture.
- Argued the outbreak of Covid-19 has shed a light on essential workers, with changes to what we understand by 'essential worker' to include those in supermarkets and the transport industry.
- Noted he used to work in Asda, therefore it seems only natural to him that retail workers are essential workers.
- Welcomed the deserved recognition retail workers are getting now that they did not get in the past.
- Raised an initial question: how will the responsibilities of organisations to their staff change?
- Expressed delight at the range of speakers at the meeting.



**Jo Causon, Chief Executive of The Institute of Customer Service:**

- Said that, in these extraordinary times, the Institute has been tracking employee engagement as well as customer satisfaction.
- Referenced the launch of the Institute's campaign, 'Inspiring a Service Nation' in March 2020 and the Institute's finding that 50% of GDP is generated through service.
- Built on Philip Davies MP's point about the importance of goods and services roles, as they have been keeping the lights on and keeping people fed.
- Noted that this session is about trying to recognise that value, as some still do not place enough attention to those professions.
- Spoke of the Institute's research on what customers felt should be the priorities of organisations at this time. 47% of customers felt that organisations should prioritise health and wellbeing, 71% of customers are more likely to visit a place that is adhering to social distancing, and 64% are still concerned about returning to shops.
- Said this sends a clear message on the skill sets that will be required of staff, as customers are asking for their safety to be supported, which is more than a 'meet and greet' service.
- Noted the Institute's finding that, of those staff that have been furloughed, only 22% are receiving training.
- Stated, in terms of setting an agenda, it's important we build on what we've been going through in the Covid-19 lockdown to recognise the skills and capabilities of those we've been relying on.

**Philip Davies MP**

- Thanked Jo and welcomed Joanne Cairns to say a few words.

**Joanne Cairns, Deputy Head of Research and Economics at USDAW**

- Explained that USDAW represents workers across retail, distribution, and manufacturing, with most members working in major supermarkets and the food retail sector.
- Revealed that 70% of members during this period have raised concerns about Covid-19 with their employer.
- Stated that USDAW are working with employers to keep their members safe and that they are particularly focusing on ensuring those who are sick or vulnerable and cannot work are properly paid, as retail workers do not have the option of working from home.
- Noted that implementing social distancing rules is a new and challenging part of retail work.
- Echoed Jo Causon and Philip Davies MP's point that the Covid-19 crisis has shown that retail is essential work.
- Said that the 3 million retail workers in the UK have experienced a fundamental lack of respect, because of assumptions that their jobs are low-skilled and only done because there are no better opportunities available. These are real, skilled, and often gruelling jobs, she argued.
- Revealed that violence and abuse against retail workers has doubled, calling on the government to introduce tougher sentences for those that attack staff.
- Also spoke of the low pay and insecure hours in the sector, stating that half of retail workers have had to skip bills to make ends meet, that sick pay in some cases is still unexpectedly low, and that a crisis in job security began long before the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Called for fundamental reform of the tax system and greater support for local authorities investing high streets.
- Argued a rush to automation in the retail sector would be a mistake, as human interaction in shops is at the centre of our communities.
- Said we should invest in skills so retail workers can keep up with the pace of technological change.
- Noted that MPs in attendance may have received emails from USDAW members about the deregulation of Sunday trading.
- On this, she revealed that 92% of USDAW members are not in favour of this, and she argued that a Covid-19 recovery plan needs to be more ambitious than a few extra hours of trading on a Sunday.

**John Barnett, Director of Operations at npower**

- Explained that his role principally focuses on the mobilisation of smart meter systems, following the slight relaxation of the Covid-19 lockdown.
- On his professional background, revealed that he used to be an engineer but has significant customer experience.

- Speaking from an energy industry perspective, he said that installation teams are already in the essential worker category.
- However, he said the Covid-19 crisis has seen the country boil down to the real essentials of food, water, and power, with many customers showing greater appreciation of the services they receive.
- Acknowledged that a proportion of customers still aren't and said we need to work on that.
- Stated that npower is closing in the second half of this year in a merger with E.ON.
- He argued that the key point from a response perspective is about partnerships.
- Noted how npower welcomed the Government's 11<sup>th</sup> May guidance on how to work safely in other people's homes and used this as an anchor for their response.
- Stated the importance of confidence and the Covid-19 secure banner, as its crucial employees feel confident enough to return to work.
- On engagement, he said that npower has had heavy consultation and proactive work with BEIS. He also noted that work with trade union colleagues in Unite has been essential.
- Spoke of the benefits of the linkage of employee engagement, confidence, and union engagement in a three-way "join-up".
- Within this, he argued, recognition of essential workers matters. He said Secretary of State for BEIS, Alok Sharma's letter to the industry paying tribute to frontline workers made a massive positive impact in terms of recognition.
- Said that npower has furloughed about 1000 employees.
- As they return to 'normal business', such as smart meter installs, he noted, Npower has focused on ensuring high quality customer interactions as well as getting the install right first time. Revealed that first time success rates are up for npower.
- Stated that he has found a majority of npower's office base can work from home and they are opening offices in a very limited way. Indeed, npower is seeing a very high employee attendance level, having found that 80% of their employees prefer home working to office-based working.
- Revealed he has seen an increase in customer services ratings.
- On the future, said the key for npower is their partnership with BEIS on a stimulus for infrastructure, as BEIS are very keen to see smart technology at the centre of the UK's recovery.
- Said the crisis enables the UK to fulfil our climate change objectives, predicting that this topic will return.

#### **Jonathan Cowie, Chief Operating Officer at Vivid Homes**

- Explained that Vivid Homes is a social housing provider in the South of England.
- On his professional background, said that he has 10 years' experience in social housing and 20 years' experience in utilities.
- Stated that Vivid Homes' service affects how customers feel safe every day, with their essential workers delivering advice through contact centres, as well as running services to reduce worry about paying rent.
- Echoed earlier points about the value of essential workers, arguing that the Covid-19 crisis has presented an opportunity for organisations to hold up a mirror to themselves.
- On Vivid Homes' response, said that a two-way dialogue with colleagues has been a key principle from the start, in the aim of keeping them safe whilst continuing to deliver core services. This response has asked two questions: what will customers say, and what will colleagues say?
- Revealed that they have changed the definition of a core day and delivered more flexibilities for colleagues.
- On protecting and training essential workers, he noted that guidance on training was a priority for Vivid Homes, that they had faced early challenges on sourcing PPE, and that they had delivered an extensive communications programme to reinforce the message of safety for workers as they are out and about.
- Noted that workers are trained to walk away from a visit if they do not feel safe.
- Said that Vivid Homes did stop those works on routine repairs and replacement kitchens that did not comply with guidance early on.
- Said that Vivid Homes also took the opportunity to work on training more generally, including around the helpfulness and knowledge of staff.
- In terms of lessons for the future and recommendations for policy, he highlighted the power of having a clear direction and collaborative working for Vivid Homes and the nation.
- Said that we cannot call someone an essential worker at one point but not at another.



- Also noted that Covid-19 has shown a greater need for suitable homes for key workers, stating that he would welcome Government policy on increasing the provision of affordable homes by broadening the definition of key workers to include additional essential workers.
- Noted that this crisis presents a real opportunity to harness creativity in terms of flexible working, reducing the need to travel, and improving work-life balance.
- Said we should also be thinking carefully about mental health.
- Concluded by stating that Vivid Homes has found their front-line teams are capable of doing far more than they previously gave them credit for.

#### **Philip Davies MP**

- Following the opening statements from the speakers, he opened the discussion.
- Agreeing with Joanne Cairns' point that legislation is needed to reprimand those that attack shop workers, he asked Joanne how well supermarkets and employers deal with instances of violence against their staff? Do they ensure people perpetrating these attacks are properly prosecuted?

#### **Joanne Cairns, Deputy Head of Research and Economics at USDAW**

- Said USDAW works with employers on security and that most employers are fairly good with pursuing prosecutions.
- However, she caveated, pressure on police resources means that instances like low-value shoplifting do not see prosecutions, even those retail staff having to deal with it end up being attacked or injured.
- Noted that not all attacks on retail workers are physical or criminal, with poor treatment and emotional abuse having a significant impact on mental health.

#### **Philip Davies MP**

- Asked John Barnett to elaborate on his point about the impact of working from home on his team, particularly in terms of how Npower will ensure those working from home feel part of the team.

#### **John Barnett, Director of Operations at Npower**

- Explained that, principally, the success of working from home comes down to the technological infrastructure available.
- Said that Npower had begun a culture of flexible working a while ago, therefore they were ready to transition to remote working.
- Revealed that Eon's IT system does not support widescale remote working.
- Argued that the popularity of working from home relates to not needing to travel.
- Furthermore, he noted that evidence shows that people might not be productive, but they are more attendant at work.
- Looking ahead, he suggested that different teams could use the office environment on different days.
- Concluded that remote working and less travelling is beneficial for the climate.

### **Contributions from attendees**

#### **Philip Davies MP**

- Thanked the speakers for their answers to his questions and opened the discussion further to guest attendees.

#### **Carolyn Harris MP**

- Greeted all attendees and said it was a pleasure to join.
- Asked Johnathan Cowie about problems with essential maintenance, especially with associations trying to get out of gas servicing.

#### **Johnathan Cowie, Chief Operating Officer at Vivid Homes**

- Stated that there is flexibility in the guidance that recognises shielding and vulnerable customers and there is a strong focus on sticking to the 12-month cycle for gas servicing.
- Revealed that, out of Vivid Homes' housing stock, only 23 certificates are out of date.

#### **Carolyn Harris MP**

- Went on to ask all speakers whether they felt they were receiving adequate and regular guidance?



- Noted that her work with the beauty sector revealed they are struggling with a lack of coherent guidance.

**Johnathan Cowie, Chief Operating Officer at Vivid Homes**

- Said that the major challenge for Vivid Homes arises from customers also needing to respect social distancing.

**Joanne Cairns, Deputy Head of Research and Economics at USDAW**

- Revealed that USDAW worked with the British Retail Consortium to develop guidance before the Government published their guidance and that part of the Government's guidance draws on that.
- Said that USDAW did have the opportunity to feedback and had a good level of consultation.
- Noted there is a gap in the guidance on the clinically vulnerable returning to work, expressing concern about employers making clinical decisions and employees not being safe if they are made to return to work.
- Said that some employers have been very good in terms of referring cases to occupational health.

**Lord Whitty**

- Expressed interest in a question Philip Davies asked earlier, regarding whether what has happened during the Covid-19 outbreak will move us to a new normal or prove to be merely a hiccup.
- Noted that working from home affects the relationship between workers and their work.
- Additionally, as consumers are used to shopping online now, he asked whether businesses will move employees and consumers online to save money? Will this trend continue in the long-term?
- Argued that very vulnerable groups cannot use digital technology with any degree of proficiency, which presents a serious problem in terms of equality of access.

**John Barnett, Director of Operations at Npower:**

- Agreed that there will be a shift online and towards remote working for all the reasons Lord Whitty pointed out
- However, he acknowledged and agreed that home working is not for everyone and legislation needs to respect that.
- Highlighted the difficulty of remote working for those with challenging home lives or young children.
- Said it is about finding a balance and that we are not going to see 100% or 80% of people working from home in the future.

**Philip Davies MP**

- Asked if Lord Whitty had anything else to add.

**Lord Whitty**

- Asked for answers to his questions from USDAW's perspective.

**Joanne Cairns, Deputy Head of Research and Economics at USDAW**

- Acknowledged that this pandemic has exacerbated a pre-existing shift towards online shopping however, she stated that most people still make transactions in traditional bricks and mortar shops.
- Referenced the long queues that formed on 15 June when non-essential shops were re-opened, although she noted that whether going out to shop in the pandemic will be sustained is uncertain.
- Agreed with Lord Whitty on the point of digital exclusion of vulnerable people.
- Noted the value of human interaction for combatting loneliness.
- Said there is the potential that, if retailers respond well, there could be a pushback against automation, although it is currently too early to tell.

**Philip Davies MP**

- Invited Andy Francis to speak.

**Andy Francis, Head of Stores Wales, Merseyside & West Midlands at Boots UK**

- Said that, in his role at Boots UK, he witnessed the pressure put on the retail sector by the shift to online shopping.
- From an essential worker perspective, said that Boots' insight tells us that the safest retail will win.





- Advocated for the approach of ensuring colleagues are safe, so they can ensure customers are safe.
- Asked Johnathan Cowie about his point on seeing record high customer service metrics.
- Also asked him if he believes that essential workers will be seen as less essential as we go on?

**Jonathan Cowie, Chief Operating Officer at Vivid Homes**

- Said that he has seen a greater appreciation of core services, with customers being far more supportive and appreciative of help and advice.

**Philip Davies MP**

- Invited Margaret Ferrier to speak.

**Margaret Ferrier MP**

- Thanked all the speakers.
- Expressed particular interest in Joanne Cairns' point about violence and abuse suffered by retail workers, agreeing that we do need to bring in some kind of legislation.
- Brought up the case of Belly Mujinga, stating it was crucial employers ensure they do not put staff in that position to the best of their ability.
- Expressed concern about staff being afraid of reporting instances of abuse because they do not want to be seen as the one complaining.
- Agreed with earlier points that there is the potential to develop a better work life balance now, with long commutes cut out.
- However, she did also agree that some people have not enjoyed remote working, especially those living alone.
- Highlighted the value of corner shops, as staff get to know customers on a regular basis and those customers can go into these places for social interaction.
- Said there will have to be a balance reflected in legislation.
- Raised a 'good news story' of a constituent that works for Open Reach who travelled all the way to an outer island to keep residents connected during lockdown. She had raised an Early Day Motion on this constituent.
- Noted that she has never had so many conversations with union representatives than during this crisis.

**Philip Davies MP**

- Thanked Margaret for her contributions.
- Noted to Joanne Cairns that the strength of feeling on protecting workers from violence, asking her to provide further information on this to the Institute.
- Concluded his contributions by handing over to Jo Causon to surmise the meeting.

**Jo Causon, Chief Executive of the Institute of Customer Service**

- Thanked and echoed the contributions from speakers and attendees.
- Encouraged parliamentarians to attend the APPG's next session on 20 July, which will be specifically on the high street and retail.
- Said this meeting demonstrated just how important customer service is and as a profession.
- Expressed the Institute's strong belief that this will grow in importance, particularly in terms of what skills and capabilities will be needed going forward.
- Said it is incumbent on all businesses to take the opportunity to drive this forward and that we have a real opportunity to build back better.
- Concluded by stating that it is not acceptable for retail workers to face any abuse, that businesses must be clear on that, and that as customers we need to behave.

**Philip Davies MP**, Chair of the APPG, made a final comment that, as an employer, the best way to look after your customers is to look after your staff first. He then brought the meeting to a close and thanked speakers and guests.

**Ends at 10:35am**