

CSR case studies



Centrica

The *Here to HELP* programme helps to improve vulnerable customers' household energy efficiency and identifies other areas where they may need support.

● The company

Centrica's vision is to be a leading supplier of essential services to the home and other chosen markets. It seeks to achieve this in Britain through three consumer brands, British Gas, Dyno and One.Tel, and a service division - Centrica Business Services - that develops products and services for commercial customers.

It also has two non-customer facing businesses that support the customer brands: Centrica Energy and Centrica Storage. Centrica Energy sources the gas and electricity to supply customers through upstream gas production and electricity generation facilities and through wholesale and gas trading activities. Centrica Storage provides gas storage services for a wide range of customers including other businesses within the group.

Centrica is also active overseas. In North America it is the market leader in the unregulated sector of energy supply through its subsidiary in Canada, Direct Energy. In the USA, under a number of brands, the business supplies electricity and natural gas. Its commercial division, Direct Energy Business Services, also provides comprehensive, integrated energy solutions across Canada and Texas. In Europe Centrica supplies its customers in Belgium and in Spain.

Centrica's approach to corporate social responsibility is based on the recognition that

its business focuses on delivering essential products and services to millions of people every day. By understanding its impact on society, the economy and the wider environment, Centrica aims to develop positive relationships with stakeholders to benefit both business and the community. This approach translates into six areas of Centrica's work: home efficiency in energy, responsible business practice, improving local communities, making services accessible, protecting the environment, and involving staff.

This case study focuses on how Centrica is helping to improve local communities through the *Here to HELP* programme.

● The drivers

The *Here to HELP* programme was developed in 2002 as a response to energy efficiency targets set by the government. Fifty per cent of the target was focused on the household energy efficiency of vulnerable customers. Failure to comply could result in fines of up to 10% of turnover. The desire to comply was a key driver for this initiative. However, *Here to HELP* also aims to improve the quality of life for families, older people and disabled people in some of Britain's most deprived communities.

● Taking action

The *Here to Help* concept was developed internally at British Gas, whilst the strategy was developed in collaboration with seven

charities; Help the Aged, Royal National Institute of the Blind, Scope, Gingerbread, Save the Children, National Debtline, and Family Welfare Association. From concept to launch in November 2002, the programme took 3 months to develop and is now the largest independent initiative of its type.

The programme aimed to ensure British Gas was able to talk to its vulnerable customers (who include those with disabilities, the elderly, families and those in debt) to identify the type of help they need to improve the energy efficiency of their homes. Whilst having that conversation with the 'vulnerable customer' they can also register them for a benefit assessment and connect them to the partner charities who may be able to help them in other ways.

Local authorities and social housing providers help to identify the areas of deprivation where the programme can make the greatest difference. These groups, together with the charities, provide expert advice, particularly in the approach needed by the assessors to engage with vulnerable customers. These assessors are sub-contractors branded as *Here to HELP* personnel. They are brought in because they have the key skills and experience required and they make the home visits. They are further trained to make an assessment of the customer's requirements, including referrals for benefit assessments. These benefit assessments are completed subsequently either over the phone or at a house visit by trained personnel from the local authorities.

In setting this up there were operational challenges. Working with seven charities proved time consuming, as did making sure that the recruitment and training of assessors was satisfactory. Both were essential to ensure the customer's experience of the visit was more than satisfactory.

Before the *Here to HELP* programme other approaches had been tried. For example Centrica helped to fund local authority energy efficiency programmes. But as other utilities

were doing the same thing, there was no brand awareness or differentiator for the business.

'Benefits to society' have been measured by the participation of households since the programme was launched. So far 330,000 households have signed up for energy efficiency support. 112,000 households have been surveyed. Efficiency measures have been installed, for example a boiler has been replaced, in over 60,000 households. 26,000 people have also been referred to charity partners. The charities have been able to help, for example, with the provision of glasses to the partially sighted or with specialist equipment for disabled people. 15,000 people have had their benefits re-assessed leading to an average extra annual income of £1,300 per home, which amounts to the identification of £5½ million of unclaimed benefits.

● **The business benefits**

Centrica has benefited because the programme has helped to differentiate British Gas from its competitors. The range of actions provided in the programme creates a good impression, particularly with potential customers. This has generated an advantage for British Gas, particularly with local authorities, who are now selecting them to help with their own energy efficiency programmes.

● **Why is it CSR?**

Centrica's programme goes beyond meeting government energy targets in that it helps to identify the needs, not necessarily related to energy use, of vulnerable customers. Through a partnership approach it is helping to improve their quality of life and make a positive contribution to society.

● **What next?**

Centrica plans to expand the programme's present focus on helping people in social housing to encompass the wider community. This would also involve widening the collaboration to include other charities so that maximum engagement and benefit could result.

Contact us

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