

Future-Proofing the Contact Centre for 2025 and Beyond

Winter 2024/25



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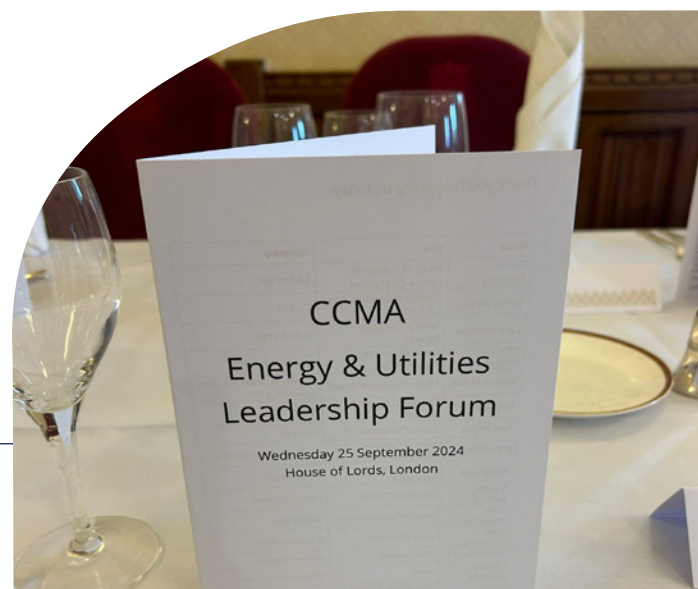


Energy & Utilities Leadership Forum

The Leadership Series is the documented output from the CCMA's series of Leadership Forum meetings. These take place at the House of Lords and provide an exclusive opportunity for senior contact centre leaders to explore the key factors driving change in their industry - and to consider how to continue innovating and adding value for the benefit of the customer, colleagues, and the business.

Energy & Utilities Leadership Forum attendees:

- Mark Armstrong, Head of CX Sales, Business Systems
- Emma Dark, Director of Consumer Care UK & Ireland, Cuckoo
- Daniel Edwards, Head of Customer Centre Operations, Cadent Gas
- Carly Freeman, Head of Customer Services, Insite Energy
- Mike Gauterin, Customer Services & Technology Director, United Utilities
- Alex Gold, Director, Customer Support Enablement, OVO
- Andrew Jacobs, Chief Architect, Business Systems
- Russell Lane, Head of Customer Experience, Utilita Energy
- Kate Law, Director of Membership and Learning, CCMA
- Ryan McCay, Head of Residential CX, Power NI
- Josh Porter, Head of Customer Experience, The Student Energy Group
- Chrissie Spencer, Director of Marketing and Partnerships, CCMA
- Andrew Springall, Operations Director, Utility Warehouse
- Claire Thomlinson, Head of Customer Service, Valda Energy





The energy and utilities sector has been through a challenging few years with the energy crisis, supporting vulnerable customers through the financial crisis, as well as new regulations impacting customer experience (CX). With Ofgem now challenging energy companies to match other top performing sectors for customer service, firms are working hard to become easier for customers to contact, as well as becoming more proactive in terms of providing support to vulnerable customers and late payers. Given just how much disruption the sector has undergone, how is customer service performing, and what steps need to be taken in order to prepare the industry for the inevitable challenges to come?

What does the future look like? Where are industry leaders focusing their attention in 2025?

The CCMA's Membership and Learning Director, Kate Law, started by asking attendees: "what's the current state of customer service within the energy and utilities sector, and where are leaders focusing their efforts?" More specifically, Kate also asked what strategies are emerging for the use of multi-channel and self-serve to enable more proactive contact for CX and speed of response to complaints reduction?

Andrew Springall from Utility Warehouse suggested that: "there's lots of big decisions to take over the next couple of years that will have a big impact going forward. Get the technology right, whether it's innovations like AI for agent

notes or summarisation, and you can cut minutes off the end of a call with huge implications for productivity. Agents love it too. However, while there's lots of great innovation across the sector, there's very little so far where AI is being used to support back-end processes – solutions that may highlight where things might be broken or aren't performing as well as they could."

Kate then asked whether the need to make services easier for customers to access was seeing an increase in channels such as WhatsApp? Mike Gauterin from United Utilities sees WhatsApp as a great way to support high volume queries. "Why do customers call us? In our sector its billing that's often the biggest call driver – the bill lands and customers might think it's wrong or need some further explanation. WhatsApp can help here."

"Tools like WhatsApp and LiveChat are great as a help option – particularly where customers are happy to step back for an hour or so while waiting for an answer," added Andrew. "We did a pilot across some 150,000 WhatsApp interactions with customers giving it an 83% CX score. So it works well, but what's significant is that if the technology really fits it can make a real difference. Traditional calls in our sector can result in as many as 25% return calls within 4-6 weeks. We found that with WhatsApp the rate is just 3%."

Emma Dark has recently joined Cuckoo having previously worked in the retail sector with Estee Lauder. "We had WhatsApp as a primary channel, with a 24-hour rule in terms of responding and it worked well. We're still building our brand at Cuckoo, but we'll be looking to extend our traditional voice and email channels, with a key focus being

to build AI on to our telephony platform with agent assist capability.” Claire Thomlinson said that they were working with agent assist technology at Valda Energy, and were also looking at setting up a WhatsApp channel for customers.

Alex Gold outlined how at OVO they were getting good CSAT on WhatsApp. “We’re currently running at around four hours for WhatsApp responses, and we’re always looking at the balance between answering quicker or handling a response within the shift. We were concerned that if someone logs off then the contact would disappear, so we’ve developed custom widgets.”

Do newer channels such as WhatsApp work well for any specific applications?

Emma said she had heard WhatsApp being recommended as a strong channel for debt recovery, but wondered whether anyone had experience of that. She thought: “WhatsApp doesn’t feel right for that – more of a channel for practical issues such as billing and top-ups?”

Alex agreed that debt recovery was a sensitive issue, but that there was also a role for channels such as WhatsApp. “Understandably, lots of customers don’t want to speak about debt issues. We find that first-time debtors are more comfortable with digital channels.”

Based in the North West, a region with 47% of the UK’s most deprived areas, United Utilities has around 30 people focused on debt. According to Mike: “we concentrate on offering meaningful support such as payment breaks, and we also aim to provide our customers with the ability to engage via their channel of choice, whether that’s voice, outbound, or through digital routes such as WhatsApp. However, it’s important that new channels are substitutional rather than additive.”

How do you know you’re getting things right from a quality perspective?

Kate then highlighted how different organisations are using a range of technologies to record, mark and track their quality performance. But how do you know you’re capturing and acting on the right information?

Alex explained how OVO “initially went the whole hog using

a CCaaS platform’s dedicated quality module. Now we have our own much more modular quality platform that takes advantage of all our in-house data science. We can cross reference our call transcriptions against specific actions in our unified energy software platform, so we’re able to track not just how the interaction went but also check if the right actions were also taken.”

“Taking this approach helps OVO deliver a lower-cost, high-engagement customer experience that’s built around trust, satisfaction and loyalty,” added Alex. “Tying quality with specific actions also means we can start to look beyond quality as a scoring tick box and start considering it as a flex-resource that identifies problems and prioritises them for solving. As ever, we also ensure that our quality team works closely with MI for business intelligence and the broader business for CX insights.”

Russell Lane from Utility Energy said: “you may be fully-compliant with six ticks, but it’s still possible that the quality of the call was terrible. Or the customer may have had their issue solved, but weren’t satisfied with the experience. You can’t look at quality metrics from just one perspective.”

Russell then asked whether companies with all their quality measures in place were achieving quantifiable performance improvements. For example, had OVO seen a drop in repeat calls? Alex said that they found that repeat calls within 28 days had fallen. Andrew added that at Utility Warehouse: “we take the highest repeat callers and work through to find out the reasons why. If you’ve got someone who’s called back 28 times then it’s clear there’s an issue that hasn’t been solved. We use AI to summarise, then look through the data with the quality team – was it the process? Was it a quality issue?”

What particular challenges can energy and utilities customer service teams expect over the next year?

Looking forward over the next 12 months, Kate asked guests whether there were any industry-specific issues that customer service teams should be thinking about. Two issues that featured were potential issues around smart



meters, as well as the need for more regulatory flexibility around emergency services provision.

According to Russell: “because regulators mandate that customers should be kept on supply –even when they’re behind on payments, there’s an inevitable accumulation of debt. This means that firms have to distinguish between the ‘can’t pay’ and ‘won’t pay’, and brings an increased emphasis on smart meter usage. This raises customer concerns about electronic monitoring, but all we’re trying to do here is understand customer usage.”

Challenges with emergency free phone lines

The discussion then turned to the impact of increased volumes on emergency phone lines. Daniel Edwards heads up Customer Care for Cadent Gas – the company that manages the national gas emergency free phone line on behalf of the gas industry. “We’re who you call if you can smell gas,” he said.

“We’ve certainly seen challenges in terms of volume. During the recent energy crisis we were inundated with calls – our forecast for December was already an increased forecast to around 146,000. Throughout the month, we received 239,993 calls, with the majority of the additional calls being received within a short 10 day period.” asked Dan. “Seven of our busiest 10 days in the history of the service came within that 10 day period. Most of which were not actually safety critical

calls and were misdirected because customers could not get through to the relevant companies that they needed, so they called the emergency line.”

While Dan recognised concerns customers might have with energy prices and storms, the company’s core mission is to keep people safe, not to deal with service queries. Responding to increased volumes meant an all hands on deck approach, with internal HR and finance people tasked with taking calls, as well as quickly training students from the local university. One of the key steps for Cadent has been to engage Ofgem to get a selection step agreed. “In a repeat event of significant volume, we now has the option to add in a pre-triage process to our call handling activity to help ensure that we focus on the most safety critical calls as a priority,” added Dan. “Getting callers to press one for ‘if you smell gas’ and press 2 for ‘other’, will allow us to focus on emergency calls. We are always looking at other future technology possibilities, such as working with AI, but that would require Ofgem to amend its current Gas Safety (Management) Regulation, so there are always complexities involved.”

Mike recognised these challenges – having previously been responsible for four years for the 999 calls at BT, where the SLA for response was five seconds. “It’s important to be able to triage calls quickly and to re-assure callers – ‘yes, I’ve got that’ or ‘don’t worry, we’re dealing with it’. Voice was 99.9% of this, but it will be interesting to see how those now running these services can take advantage of innovations such as WhatsApp and AI to make things more responsive.”



How do we make colleagues' lives easier for them?

Knowing that advisors predominantly want to deliver great service, Kate then asked attendees whether customer service leaders could be doing more to make life easier for their colleagues?

One of the concerns shared by those around the table was a worrying increase in customer abusiveness. According to Mike: "we're certainly seeing a lot more 'normalised abuse' coming in from customers. We're keeping close to this issue and working hard to minimise its impact on our people."

Josh Porter from Student Energy agreed, describing how "whenever we present students with a bill we quickly find their parents are getting in touch with us to protest on behalf of their children. Things seem to go from 0-100 whenever students receive their bills – with many of them turning immediately to Trust Pilot to share their feelings. Given the nature of our business there are, of course, issues with student debt."

"We acknowledge this at OVO, and have added a function to our advisor shift swap app so that people can step back and take a break when they've experienced challenging customer calls," said Alex. "If someone's just had three difficult calls in a row they can take a wellness break via the app, their team manager will get an email and can use our chat app to confirm."

Back into the contact centre

Kate then asked the group how advisors were responding to a world where they had to deal with more assertive customers while at the same time always being monitored for quality and performance.

Andrew said that "at Utility Warehouse we have amazing teams across the board, but advisors can get frustrated by too much technology, and if they're frustrated they don't tend to hang around. Additionally, we've found that while lots of people worked through Covid with us, many have gone back to their original industries that weren't operating during lockdown."

The discussion then turned to where people were with homeworking. Andrew said that his operation went totally

remote, but now everyone was back in the contact centre. Mike at United Utilities also said that they no longer had any hybrid working, recalling that "my predecessor took an early call to bring everyone in full-time, and we've worked hard to make it a great place for people to work. There's nothing to replicate being in the contact centre, you can hear everything, and you can be much more responsive. However, it's interesting that we've been having to get skills back into team managers that they lost while working at home."

Emma agreed, saying that in her roles "we've had lots of dynamic team leaders who came in over the Covid period and were impressive working from home. But now, back in the office, it's sometimes like they can't hear what's going on around them. So there's a job to be done in strengthening digital leaders who can require support when it comes to making things work in the contact centre."



Future-proofing the contact centre – key takeaways

Concluding the session, Kate asked the group to highlight any issues raised during the discussion that they would like to share with their industry colleagues:

“Don’t forget to think about how you can use AI to support your back-end processes – there are potentially huge productivity benefits to be gained.”
– Andrew Springall, Utility Warehouse

“Focus on your biggest call drivers – in our sector it’s often billing. Channels such as WhatsApp can help here.” – Mike Gauterin, United Utilities

“There’s real value in cross-referencing your call quality activities with the data from your energy software platform so you can track not just how the interaction went but also if the right actions were taken.” – Alex Gold, OVO

“A key focus for us is building AI on to our telephony channel with agent assist, as we look to extend our traditional voice and email channels.” – Emma Dark, Cuckoo

“You can’t look at quality metrics from just one perspective. You may be fully-compliant with all six ticks, but it’s still possible that your call quality was terrible.” – Russell Lane, Utility Energy

“Focus on your core mission. At Cadent we were able to introduce a selection step in our journey – press one if you smell gas – this allowed us to focus only on emergency calls during periods of increased volume.”
– Daniel Edwards, Cadent Gas

“Students seem quick to complain whenever they get their bills – threatening to cut off their broadband service concentrates their minds!” – Josh Porter, Student Energy



About the CCMA

For more than 30 years, the CCMA has been absolutely dedicated to supporting contact centre professionals. We're constantly pushing ourselves to do more for our thriving community, which happens to be the largest community of contact centre professionals in the UK. The CCMA was founded with the goal of sharing best practice and networking to improve skills and knowledge in order to progress contact centre operations - and we live by that to this day.

We give those that work in contact centres the chance to discuss ideas and share experiences through member-only Special Interest Groups and online and in-person events.

Members are invited to become Accredited through the Contact Centre Standards Framework and get independent guidance on where to focus for improvements. There is also the opportunity to benchmark the operation against 25+ KPIs.

The CCMA Academy gives everyone a structured learning opportunity to support both personal and professional development for the benefit of their operation.

And of course, we celebrate the progress our industry is making through the UK National Contact Centres Awards. Those that win go on to share their stories through channels such as the UK National Contact Centre Conference, Best Practice Visits and CareerTalk. They are invited to input into the Special Interest Groups and other events.

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