Age Action Submission on the CER review of the Electricity and Gas Suppliers’ Handbook 13 May 2016

Introduction

Age Action, founded in 1992, is a national charity which promotes positive ageing and better policies and services for older people. We have 2,500 members comprising individuals, statutory, private and voluntary organisations. As well as being an advocacy and representative organisation we also provide a range of services. For example, our information service received over 2,400 calls last year, including requests for assistance on utility-related issues e.g. social welfare supports and entitlements, home energy efficiency schemes, assistance during cold weather periods and billing and debt related issues. We also run the Care and Repair programme, undertaking small jobs in older people’s homes. This programme also provides a registered trade referral list, offering older people a list of trustworthy tradespersons.

This submission is based on a group of older members of Age Action. Unfortunately due to time constraints I was not able to complete a detailed review of the handbook with these members.

Access to the Handbook:

Our members were very interested having access to the principles as outlined in the draft handbook and felt that it might be a useful for a ‘slimed down’ version of the handbook be made available to older people. This would assist them when dealing with suppliers. Such a version might be in the form of a booklet in plain English and set out the 7 principles. They were surprised and pleased at the principles as being proposed.

Status of the Handbook

There was confusion as to the purpose and status of the Handbook and its contents. People were not sure who the CER were or what was its role. There was a fear that the principles and guidelines had no legal status and therefore no regulatory force. One member felt that it should go before the Dáil to get regulatory force.

Marketing and Sign Up

People were very annoyed that many offers were dependent on having the internet to know about them, to sign up to them or to get one’s bill. Another issue regarding switching was that one’s original supplier continues to send bills either in error or because there is a small outstanding charge. This can be upsetting and confusion and some older people wonder could not all outstanding charges to transfer to the new supplier or at least be included in the new supplier’s first bill. Another issue is that the original supplier may engage in frequent ‘call-backs’ trying to frustrate
the switch. Older people find it intimidating having sales people at their door trying to get them to switch likewise cold callers over the phones are problematical. Vulnerable people need a ‘think about it period’ before anything is signed rather than a ‘cooling off period’. This would happen before anything is signed and the onus would be on the company seeking the switch to contact the vulnerable customer to confirm they wish to switch, rather than the customer contacting the new supplier to say they have changed their minds. One of the problems retarding older customers participating in the market is the use of jargon

Billing

On the level and type of information our member thought that clear tariff information was very important. That people need to be able to see how much they have to pay and exactly what they are paying for, the issue of the carbon tax and double VAT on bills where two issues that caused confusion and anger.

Vulnerable customers

It was that the identification and registration of a customer should be the responsibility of the utility rather than the customer, though there also needs to be a clear mechanism for customers or their representatives to register vulnerable customers. There was some confusion about what advantages there may be in registering as a vulnerable customer. On the issue of the PAYG meters people raised the problem of running out of electricity and people forgetting to purchase more electricity. Those who either used or knew people who used them felt that they were useful and a good idea.