

CER Consults on Measures to Protect and Empower Energy Customers

The comments below are in relation to electricity suppliers only

Marketing and advertising material:

- All materials should make clear what the standard cost of electricity per unit is for each company and what the actual cost per unit for the customer is after any proposed discounts in addition to the cost of VAT, PSO and Standing Charge, rather than relying on a percentage figure for potential savings.

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The customer sign up process:

- As above, sales representatives, in person or on the phone, should make clear to customers what the actual cost will be rather than relying on a percentage figure. Representatives should be obliged to enquire if the customer currently has a free electricity allowance under the Household Benefit Package and inform the customer what steps, if any should be taken, e.g. current obligation to inform Department of Social Protection if changing supplier, to ensure that the customer will continue to receive the free electricity allowance. Representatives should provide customers with a template letter for the Department of Social Protection indicating the required information to be passed on, e.g. Customer MPRN, new account number, name of new supplier.
- If the process is being done over the phone or online, customers should receive clear guidance as to how to ensure continued payment of the free electricity allowance when changing supplier.

Ascertaining when a customer is eligible to register as a vulnerable customer:

- Sales representatives in person or on the phone should clearly ask if customers wish to avail of services for vulnerable customers, e.g. receiving bills in large print or alternative formats.

PAYG services for vulnerable customers:

- Cost of PAYG services should be clearly communicated to customers

Options to increase customer participation in the energy markets:

Currently many customers, in particular older people who do not have IT skills or access to the Internet or do not have a bank account are at a disadvantage in accessing better energy deals.

- CER should consult with Dept. of Social Protection to develop a Direct Debit system from Social Welfare payments, as is currently available under the Household Budget scheme for some customers

At the moment, most suppliers offer a percentage reduction if customers opt for online bills, which means that those customers who wish to continue to receive bills by post are charged at a variable rate, depending on their usage.

- Suppliers should offer a fixed and reasonable charge for bills by post.

- In addition, suppliers should explore alternative options for customers to receive a printed bill, perhaps through issuing a code or pin which could allow access to a printed bill through the Post Office or support organisations such as Age Action

Options to increase customers' ability to understand and compare energy offers.

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- As outlined above, ensure clarity in any information provided about potential savings highlighting potential savings for 'average' household consumption.
- Make information available in Plain Language, large print and other formats
- Develop information campaign for radio, including local radio, TV and newspapers.
- Ensure that Smart Meters are available in clear easy to read formats with accompanying explanations booklets in Plain Language, large print and other formats
- Review current guidelines re billing information in consultation with a wide range of customers to ensure readability and clarity.

In addition:

Payment of Free Electricity Allowance

- Review current situation where payment of free electricity allowance under the Household Benefit Package is made directly to Electric Ireland but not to other suppliers and ensure that payment of free electricity allowance can be made directly to any supplier, which ensures that customers benefit directly from the payment

Public Consultation

- Advertise any future consultation process widely in Plain Language, in large print and other formats and on for radio, including local radio, TV and newspapers and through Local Authorities, and national organisations and community groups, in particular those working with vulnerable adults.

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