



An Coimisiún  
um Rialáil Fóntais  
**Commission for  
Regulation of Utilities**

## CRU CSG & Supplier Workshop Conclusions

7<sup>th</sup> Oct 2021

On 7<sup>th</sup> October 2021, the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) facilitated a workshop between members of its Consumer Stakeholder Group (CSG) and representatives from energy suppliers in the retail market. The focus of the workshop was to consider firstly, the impact that rising energy prices are having on consumers, and secondly, what more can be done to further empower and protect consumers over winter 2021/22 and beyond. It was a constructive session which included presentations from the CRU, CSG members and suppliers, with all parties keen to meet again.

The key conclusions from the workshop are set out below, and these will inform the CRU's customer protection action plan for winter 2021/22.

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### 1. Customer Engagement

The key theme that emerged was one of customer engagement. The workshop heard from suppliers that if a customer engages with their supplier they will not be disconnected.

(i) The workshop heard that in some cases the moratorium on disconnections during the Covid 19 pandemic had led to bill shock and a further lack of engagement by consumers. It was proposed that this could be addressed by early and ongoing engagement including the following measures:

- *Proactive engagement by suppliers.*
  - Suppliers should take every opportunity to engage with customers including through field agents.
  - PAYG suppliers could monitor customer vends/self-disconnection levels etc.
  - The CRU will look at examples from other jurisdictions, e.g., UK, to see if there is anything further which it can do.



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- *Promote customers submission of meter readings* – this would aim to avoid the buildup of arrears due to actual consumption instead of being billed on estimates which may not reflect actual energy usage. When the meter is eventually read, if the actual usage is greater than the estimations, catch-up bills may be large and unmanageable.
  - *Promote/enhance the Energy Engage Code* - the workshop heard that there is further opportunity to promote/enhance the supplier led Energy Engage Code. For example, suppliers could provide clarity on what counts as “engagement” to ensure customers know what they need to do for them to avail of this protection.
  - *Share contacts*. Suppliers and CRU to provide details for consumer organisations that may provide customers with support and assistance, be that financial or regarding accessibility (MABS, SVP, VVI).
- (ii) On vulnerable customers the workshop heard of good practices being adopted by suppliers – the CRU was of the view that it is important to share these examples amongst suppliers. These included:
- Suppliers being cognisant of how they use the term ‘vulnerable customer’ as some customers may not wish to be referred to as a ‘vulnerable’.
  - Suppliers must be proactive in assessing changes in the status of vulnerable customers.
  - Suppliers should consider alternative methods of communication - engagement with accredited relevant agencies to ensure that communications are accessible to all customers.
  - Suppliers can take steps to ensure that the risk of failing to register a vulnerable customer is kept to a minimum.



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- (iii) The workshop heard that new customers are getting into debt for the first time and are struggling to get out of debt. This requires a sensitive approach to engagement from suppliers in the following areas:
- Training on both the support mechanisms available to customers and on how to approach the customer sensitively/appropriately.
  - Flexibility on payment terms and payment methods is important, particularly where a customer may be “unbanked”.
  - Payment plans put in place must have regard to the customers’ circumstances and ability to pay.

### 2. Customer Education

- (i) The workshop heard of the need to raise customer awareness or rights, and supplier obligations – especially regarding vulnerable customers.
- Suppliers must take steps to identify vulnerable customers.
  - CRU will remind suppliers of the existing customer protection measures.
  - CRU will highlight new energy supplier handbook protections and encourage suppliers, where possible, to implement these protections ahead of the deadline for implementation.
- (ii) In the face of rising prices, the CRU will continue to promote opportunities for customers to switch and renegotiate.
- CRU will implement its winter communications plan.
  - A Smart services campaign is due to commence shortly; and



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- Promote opportunities for energy efficiency to reduce customers energy costs, where possible.
- (iii) Energy Action updated the workshop on the 'Behavioural Change Project' it is undertaking with energy advice training programs. The workshop attendees were invited to participate, and CRU committed to circulating details on this program following this meeting.

### 3. Ongoing Monitoring and Communications with Stakeholders

- (i) The workshop heard from all parties that customer debt is increasing and the impacts that can have on broader consumer welfare.
- CRU committed to continuing to monitor key metrics on arrears, payment plans, energy debt and disconnections.
- (ii) CSG members reported that many suppliers are working well with customers but that there may be some restrictive practices which limit customer access to/or benefit from repayment plans.
- CRU will continue to monitor supplier compliance to ensure that operational practices are not overly restrictive.
  - Suppliers might consider if it could provide more flexibility for unbanked customers?
  - The CRU will liaise with suppliers to follow up on delays in the issuing of braille bills thus narrowing the window for payment of the bill.
- (iii) Both CSG members and suppliers agreed that the workshop was a means for constructive engagement, therefore:



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- CRU will facilitate further engagements enabling greater access between Consumer Stakeholder Group members and suppliers (including the circulation of a key contact list) on increasing energy costs and other key issues which could include:
  - Smart metering apps
  - Customer accessibility issues
  - Support from NALA re training – ‘Plain English’
- Work together on a consistent communications message.
- Attendees requested another workshop this winter to discuss updates.