

Friday April 1, 2005

SOCIAL ACTION PLAN ANNUAL REVIEW IS PUBLISHED

Energy regulator Ofgem has published the annual review of its Social Action Plan which looks at the progress made in tackling fuel poverty during a year in which all major energy suppliers have increased charges significantly.

Ofgem's work under the Social Action Plan 2004-2005 was dominated by two major issues, the impact of rising wholesale energy costs and the disconnection of vulnerable customers in debt.

As a result of rising fuel costs, Ofgem Chairman Sir John Mogg has called for a more joined-up approach from companies, agencies and voluntary bodies within the industry to help beat fuel poverty. He also challenged suppliers and other organisations to do more to publicise the Priority Service Register.

Ofgem's contribution has included publishing guidelines for companies designing social tariffs for vulnerable customers and launching Energy Smart, a joint campaign with energywatch which encourages customers to save money by switching supplier, changing their payment method and using energy efficiency measures at home. Ofgem has also commissioned research to assess suppliers' corporate social responsibility initiatives.

Customer debt and disconnection has been widely debated during the past year and Ofgem contributed by publishing a report jointly with energywatch to review suppliers' progress in implementing best practice guidelines on debt and disconnection. Ofgem also welcomed the introduction by the Energy Retail Association of a 'safety net' which ensures that companies contact and support vulnerable customers and take action to avoid them being disconnected.

The annual review marks the end of the current phase of the Social Action Plan. A revised plan will be produced in the second quarter of 2005 focusing on a new set of priorities and performance indicators as part of the continuing effort to help families that are still blighted by fuel poverty.

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Notes to Editors:

1. Copies of the document "Social Action Plan Annual Review 2005" are available on the Ofgem website www.ofgem.gov.uk. Hard copies can be ordered from the Ofgem distribution centre on 020 7901 7116 or by email from distribution@ofgem.gov.uk.

2. Ofgem's five-year Social Action Plan was launched in 2000 to help tackle fuel poverty, which affects 2.25 million households in Britain according to the latest Government statistics. The plan contributes to the Government's aim to bring an end to fuel poverty for vulnerable households by 2010.
3. As part of their licence obligations domestic gas and electricity suppliers must offer special services to customers who are of pensionable age, disabled, suffering from a chronic illness or have a visual or hearing impairment. The **Priority Service Register** is available from all electricity and gas suppliers and currently offers:
 - free annual gas safety checks for qualifying customers
 - password schemes
 - bills available in large print and braille as well as talking bills
 - quarterly meter reading services
 - meters moved to an accessible location free of charge
 - easy to use controls and adapters for appliances
 - bill nominee scheme
 - priority in an emergency, this could include providing alternate heating and cooking
 - facilities in the event of disconnection.
- 4 Ofgem is the Office of the Gas and Electricity Markets, which supports the Gas and Electricity Markets Authority, the regulator of the gas and electricity industries in Great Britain. Ofgem's aim is to bring choice and value to all gas and electricity customers by promoting competition and regulating monopolies. The Authority's powers are provided for under the Gas Act 1986 and the Electricity Act 1989, as amended by the Utilities Act 2000 as well as under the Competition Act 1998 and the Enterprise Act 2002.

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