

Research Report



Micro and small businesses' experiences with and perceptions of energy broker services

Prepared for: Ofgem

Prepared by: BMG Research Qualitative Team

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1 Executive Summary

This is a summary of findings from 20 in-depth interviews undertaken by BMG Research on behalf of Ofgem in March 2015.

Interviews were conducted with non-domestic customers, focusing on micro and small businesses (businesses with fewer than 50 employees).

The research principally aimed to explore businesses' experiences and perceptions of energy broker services, including brokers, telephone services and price comparison websites (collectively known as TPIs).

1.1 Current energy arrangements

Businesses tend to choose a supplier for cost reasons but stay with them for the customer service. While switching to a new supplier to obtain a better price is an attractive prospect, the gains are often weighed up against the potential pitfalls of moving away from a supplier with whom a business is satisfied. This is particularly significant when we consider that there is a perception that prices do not vary greatly between suppliers and tariffs; that it is not always straightforward to compare tariffs because of the perceived complexity of price structures; and that the process of researching the market is time-consuming and is felt to be unlikely to bring about any real benefits.

Most businesses are at least vaguely aware of their energy contract length and renewal dates. However, they rely heavily on suppliers reminding them when it is actually time to renew or consider their options. Although they expect (and need) to be reminded, there is some feeling that suppliers may exploit this and fail to remind with enough time to look for a new deal.

There is considerable variation in terms of how often businesses review their contract arrangements. However, there is little difference by business size.

There is also considerable variation with regard to how businesses approach contract renewal. Where TPIs are used (either as a research tool or to manage the switching process), there is a reluctance to simply rely on the information they provide. Businesses are likely to ring suppliers themselves to validate the quotes. In general, this acts to reassure them that the TPI has found the best offer.

Finding a cheaper, rather than cheapest deal is the priority for most businesses. They are fairly subjective in how they assess the different deals overall and will often be happy if a deal is favourable compared with their current arrangements.

1.2 Experience of switching

The end of the contract tends to be the main trigger for switching. For others, poor customer service prompts them to think about their contract arrangements.

Most businesses using a TPI said that the switching process was made easier with their involvement. However, the fact that a broker had been employed didn't always ensure that the process was entirely problem free. Issues were still reported relating to contract terminations.

Businesses that had never switched reported that this tended to be because they were satisfied with their current supplier and a lack of conviction that the alternatives are cheaper.

1.3 Satisfaction with choice in the energy market

Perceptions of choice in the energy market reflect levels of satisfaction with current energy suppliers to a great extent. A few businesses hold the view that there is little variation in pricing and customer service, with the larger suppliers dominating the market. This latter point is, some businesses feel, exacerbated by some brokers failing to represent smaller suppliers when presenting tariff options.

1.4 Key factors in selecting an energy supplier

Whilst price is generally the key driver in choosing a supplier, other considerations (in no particular order), include:

- Transparency of costs and charges;
- Accurate billing;
- Good customer service;
- Flexibility – in terms of how contracts are structured across multiple sites;
- A reliable energy supply;
- Energy from renewable sources (for some).

1.5 Information sources

A wide range of sources of information about different tariffs and suppliers are used by businesses and they typically used more than one. These include:

- Energy brokers; both in response to approaches and actively seeking help from them;
- Internet-based sources, including price comparison, energy supplier and consumer websites;
- Contacting suppliers directly by telephone;
- Consumer publications.

Use of more than one source tended to be in response to difficulties in obtaining or understanding information from one, while those consulting brokers tended to follow up with a call to an energy supplier to check the information they had been given.

1.6 Use of TPIs

All businesses surveyed had previously been in contact with a broker in some form. Many businesses expressed their frustration with the high volume of cold calls they received from both brokers and energy suppliers. Some brokers misrepresented themselves by saying that they were an energy supplier or failing to reveal that they are initially an energy broker. Those that were upfront about the reasons for contacting businesses were better received. Businesses were much more likely to consider working with a broker who identified

themselves from the outset, were not pushy in their approach and provided time for businesses to consider their options.

Businesses received a range of contract offers from brokers, some reporting that they received between three and four, whilst others received only one. For most, this number of offers was sufficient. They believed they had been given the cheapest options. However, a few businesses felt there was very little difference in price between the offers that brokers presented. One or two businesses stated that they would have preferred more options from a wider range of suppliers.

Businesses were largely satisfied with the extent and clarity of information provided by brokers. They were particularly satisfied if brokers provided written, rather than simply verbal information and kept them up to date as to whether the contract was achieving the promised cost savings.

The benefits of using a broker were considered to be:

- That the broker was able to secure a cheaper price from an energy supplier than if the business had gone direct;
- That the broker was able to undertake extensive searches of the market for the best value options;
- That the broker took on the paperwork/administration in switching contracts.

Drawbacks included:

- Problems experienced when brokers failed to undertake the administrative elements of the switch and the perception that a smoother switch would have taken place if businesses had gone to the supplier direct;
- Difficulties in monitoring energy use and expenditure when going through a broker. There is a perceived loss of control in this respect.

The majority of businesses would consider using a broker in the future. However, businesses say that they are also likely to contact suppliers directly to ensure they were being presented with the best deals. Businesses also preferred to take the initiative and contact brokers themselves. This was the result of their experiences with unsolicited, cold calls from brokers and an underlying distrust of this approach and those who use it.

A small number of businesses reported using price comparison websites when considering their options. None of these businesses used the website to arrange their current contract. Reasons for this included:

- Lack of sufficient options; with only a small number of options being presented;
- Difficulties in understanding options as comparisons between one supplier and/or tariff and another are not straightforward with the variations in costs per unit and standing charges;
- High cost/little difference compared to existing tariff.

One respondent struggled to find a price comparison website that catered specifically for businesses.

1.7 Reasons for not using TPIs

Businesses that had **not** used a TPI to arrange their current contract cited the following reasons for this:

- Perceived costs involved in using a broker;
- Confidence that they could navigate the market themselves;
- Wanting to maintain a direct relationship with their supplier;
- Difficulties in comparing tariffs on websites.
- Poor experience of brokers in the past, including:
 - 'pushy' or 'pestering' approaches of brokers;
 - calls from overseas call centres.

1.8 Suggested improvements to broker services

Businesses suggested the following improvements to broker services:

- Fewer cold calls from brokers;
- The proper identification of the broker's firm at the outset of the call;
- A more co-operative approach from brokers when dealing with businesses; working at a pace required by the businesses, rather than applying pressure to act before businesses have had the time to give options full consideration;
- Brokers to provide a larger number of tariff and contract options;
- Tariff and contract options to be based on a wider variety of suppliers; providing options from both larger and smaller suppliers;
- Greater differentiation between tariff and contract options; more detail/explanation of differences between options from brokers when presenting them to businesses;
- Clear and timely communication from brokers;
- Statements/updates from brokers highlighting progress and savings made during contract periods;
- Brokers taking care of all necessary administration on behalf of businesses in ending existing and setting up new contracts.

2 Introduction

2.1 Background and context

In August 2014, the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem) commissioned BMG Research to undertake a programme of research to explore how micro and small businesses across England, Wales and Scotland engage in the energy market.

The first phase of the research, which involved the completion of 1,502 quantitative telephone interviews, was concluded in November 2014. BMG subsequently undertook 20 in-depth qualitative interviews, in order to further explore businesses' views and experiences.

This programme of research follows previous surveys in 2012 and 2013, which tracked the experiences of non-domestic customers, including medium and large businesses. The 2014 research focused solely on the experiences of micro and small businesses, as these were most likely to be affected by Ofgem's recent Retail Market Review.

The Retail Market Review was designed to make the non-domestic market simpler and clearer for businesses. Changes introduced as a result of the review included making it compulsory for energy suppliers to include contract end dates on bills and to allow micro businesses to provide termination notice at any time. In 2014, Ofgem also consulted on options to regulate non-domestic Third Party Intermediaries (TPIs)¹ and to improve processes for automatic rollovers and contract renewal.

2.2 Research aims and objectives

This qualitative phase of the research principally aimed to explore businesses' experiences and perceptions of energy broker services, including brokers, telephone services and price comparison websites (collectively known as TPIs). Specifically, interviews covered the following aspects of businesses' engagement with the energy market:

- Current contract arrangements; details, type and length of contract;
- Switching behaviour in the last five years; reasons for switching;
- Frequency with which energy arrangements are reviewed; triggers for reviewing arrangements; awareness of contract end dates and dates from which new contracts can be negotiated; whether businesses have noticed these dates on their bills;
- Experiences of finding out about different tariffs and suppliers; role of TPIs in this respect; specific services offered by these TPIs and those taken up by businesses;
- Experiences of working with TPIs to set up contracts; satisfaction with the process and business confidence in these sources; other sources consulted; benefits; drawbacks; costs incurred and views on whether it was value for money;
- Reasons for not using TPIs; likelihood of using them in the future;

¹ In this research, TPIs include brokers, telephone and website price comparison services.

- What has worked well for businesses in setting up energy contracts; what could be improved; how the approach to reviewing and arranging energy contracts has evolved for businesses as a consequence of their experience.

2.3 Methodology

2.3.1 Recruitment

Businesses were recruited for the in-depth interviews using a database of contacts that had completed the earlier quantitative survey² and had agreed to take part in further research. In total, BMG had a database of 796 contacts. A breakdown of the sample, in terms of the targets and achieved interviews is included in Appendix I.

All businesses were recruited via telephone by BMG's dedicated qualitative recruitment team. The recruiters used a recruitment screener to ensure that the respondents conformed to one of the quota variables regarding broker/TPI usage and switching behaviour for the research and that their inclusion did not result in a significant deviation from other quota targets based on business size, sector and nation.

During the recruitment stage, potential respondents were provided with an outline of the research aims and objectives, and details of what the in-depth interviews would involve.

2.3.2 Conduct of interviews

The in-depth interviews were undertaken between the 3rd and the 27th March 2015, by independent qualitative researchers from BMG Research. All interviews were undertaken over the telephone, and lasted between thirty and forty minutes. At the start of the interview, respondents were assured that any comments used in the report would be anonymous and would not be attributed to named individuals. They were also informed that the interview would be audio-recorded (unless they objected to this) and the file would be stored securely at BMG. Verbatim comments included in this report are shown in italics.

A discussion guide for the interviews was designed by BMG, in conjunction with Ofgem, and is included in Appendix II.

2.3.3 Note on the interpretation of qualitative research and data

Qualitative interviews can provide an understanding of what people think, need, want and care about – and can explore the reasons behind those views. The researcher guides the respondent through a series of topics (agreed beforehand with the client), but in a less structured way than with a quantitative (survey) questionnaire. Findings may emerge from interviews which the researcher and client had not previously considered; these can be identified and explored.

It is the researcher's job to ensure that all of the client's questions are answered and that every respondent has an opportunity to express his or her point of view.

It is important to note that qualitative research approaches are used to shed light on **why** people hold particular views, **rather than how many** people hold those views. The

² Micro and Small Business Engagement in Energy Markets 2014/15, BMG Research

research is intended to be illustrative rather than statistically reliable and, as such, does not allow conclusions to be drawn about the extent to which something is happening.

3 Consumer Context

3.1 Current energy arrangements

3.1.1 Importance of a reliable energy supply.

Of the businesses we spoke to in this research, all used electricity; while half also used gas to some extent. Businesses said that they used electricity for heating, lighting and powering equipment – including office equipment, power tools or specialist machinery. It is also used for small domestic appliances in the work place (kettles, microwaves, toasters etc.). Where businesses used gas, it was primarily for heating and cooking (e.g. within a bed and breakfast establishment and a care home).

Businesses consider an uninterrupted supply of electricity as vital to their operations. This is less likely to be case with regard to gas; although where it is needed for heating or used in appliances/machinery that are core to business activities (i.e. for cooking), an uninterrupted supply of gas is considered just as important. Most businesses felt they would be able to continue operating for a period of time without power. This would be anything between a couple of hours and a couple of days but by no means a prolonged period. One business highlighted that loss of power would be catastrophic and they would be unable to operate their business until power was restored.

'We wouldn't be able to do anything without it effectively. When we had the storms last year... we lost power for 3, maybe 4 days and we couldn't really do anything.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

'... if we lost electricity we wouldn't be able to cope because we wouldn't be able to do any work. We wouldn't be able to run the business.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

3.1.2 Current contract arrangements

Whilst most businesses have contract arrangements with one of the larger energy companies, a few have a contract with one of the smaller, independent suppliers.

Approximately half the businesses had been with their current energy supplier for over two years. The majority had a fixed term contract with their supplier, varying in length. Most had either a one or two year contract, whilst a few had a fixed term contract lasting three years. Only two respondents stated that they had been rolled over on their existing contract.

Businesses say that they choose not to switch supplier for a number of reasons. The main reason reported is satisfaction with the customer service they receive. While getting a better price is attractive, this is often offset against the benefit of good customer service. This is exacerbated by the perception that prices do not vary significantly and that the process of researching tariffs and contracts is time-consuming and involves getting to grips with complex price structures.

'Small businesses don't have a lot of time to check up on the resources available. Too many tariffs... the onus should be on these big organisations'

to provide the most suitable tariff rather than a total ignoramus like [me] having to shop around and find something that's appropriate.'
(Not used a broker or price comparison site at all to set up current contract; 1-9 employees)

Some respondents were unsure about their contract length and when it would be up for renewal. However, most were generally confident that they had been told this information when they agreed the contract. Their responses throughout the interview suggested that they were broadly aware of when they had to think about renewing their contract. Nevertheless, most expect their energy supplier to send them a reminder when their contract is due for renewal.

'I think it's two months before the end of the contract, they'll get in touch with us to re-quote for another term.'
(Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main source of information and advice; 10-49 employees)

'I just wait for the notifications to come through and then I'll start to look at them.'
(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 1-9 employees)

'...I know the process now: you get a 3 month letter.... I have it all noted down in my calendar and diary to remind me 6 months before they run out anyway., they do [inform me of contract end dates] but I don't really listen to what they say at that point.'
(Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main source of information and advice; 10-49 employees)

Whilst there is a reliance on suppliers reminding businesses that it was time to renew, a couple of respondents felt that suppliers could do more in this respect. There was a belief that suppliers had an ulterior motive in being slow to remind customers of renewal dates. A minority felt that suppliers wanted to reduce the time available to shop around. The result of this inability to consider options sometimes resulted in a business paying for their energy through more expensive emergency tariff rates.

'I don't think, in general, the suppliers are as open as they should be about reminding customers an end date is approaching, because they're keen on giving you as short a period as possible for you to shop around.'

(Not used a broker or price comparison site at all to set up current contract; 1-9 employees)

'[the notification] kind of just comes through with the bills so if the accounts department don't pick it up, it rolls on to emergency rates or whatever they want to call them... They're not obliged to get authorisation from someone within a position of authority. "This is our emergency standing rate, you're going to go onto that in 4 weeks' are you happy to do that?" So at the moment your silence is deemed acceptance of their 50% price hike... They work on inactivity and they work on the ignorance of customers.'

(Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main source of information and advice; 10-49 employees)

Businesses were quite confident that contract renewal details were on their bill, although most were not certain that they had actually seen it. Furthermore, the relevance of this information is very much linked to when it can be acted on. While they may be aware of their renewal date, most suggest that they still need to be prompted to act.

In arranging their current contract, seven businesses had used a broker, three had used a price comparison website (one of whom had also consulted a broker) and 10 had not used either a broker or price comparison website (although seven of these had consulted/been approached by a broker when researching their options but had not gone on to arrange their contract through the broker). Those that had not used a broker or price comparison website typically contacted energy suppliers directly, either by telephone or website while one business that had used a broker had also contacted an energy supplier direct but went on to arrange their contract through a broker.

Where brokers are consulted and used to arrange contracts, there is a reluctance to rely purely on the information they provide. Respondents reported doing their own ringing round to verify what their broker has told them. The result of this has tended to be that the broker had originally provided a competitive price. Their own research reassures them that they have been offered the best deal. Despite this, they will still go through the same verification exercise with future contracts.

'I did phone up [a supplier] to see if they I could a get a better price [than the broker's suggestion]... the lady told me they [brokers] do get it cheaper than going direct which I didn't think was right really... she said [the broker's] price was cheaper than what she could give me.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

'Even though the broker will come back and say something, I do my own homework as well, I don't take their word for it.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 1-9 employees)

To some extent, businesses are happy if the deal they negotiate compares favourably with what they are currently paying. What constitutes a good deal is subjective and based on a combination of cost and service. Businesses do not always need to pursue the cheapest available.

'I contact them [the supplier], I obviously know what my annual usage is, phone around, I look at the pricing and compare what I'm being offered to renew and then I'll expect to be able to come in 20-30% under that.'

(Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main source of information and advice; 10-49 employees)

Respondents' experiences highlight a number of issues that influence how tariffs and contracts are arranged. These include:

- Even though the brokers appear to be able to offer cheaper deals, businesses will still undertake their own research;
- Businesses that have used brokers think that brokers are able to obtain a better deal than businesses can by going direct to suppliers;
- Whether businesses go through a broker or approach a supplier directly, there is nearly always some negotiation required;
- A 'good deal' is relative; businesses set their own standards in this respect.

3.2 Experience of switching

Most businesses had switched energy supplier within the last five years: 13 had switched once or twice and five had switched multiple times. Ten respondents had switched energy supplier in the last 12 months.

Bearing in mind the fact that most businesses are on fixed term contracts, the end of the contract tended to be the main switching trigger. Businesses reported that the biggest motivation for looking for a new supplier was a better, more competitive price.

'It's purely on price, I think it saved us £250 swapping.'

(Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main source of information and advice; 10-49 employees)

The end of a contract also gave businesses the opportunity to find a supplier that provided better customer service; a few businesses reported this to be the main trigger for switching. Poor supplier customer service tended to be reflected by difficulties in finding the right person to speak to when required and struggling to obtain answers to queries, as well as mid-contract changes to terms and conditions.

Businesses did not want to spend any more time than was necessary in resolving a problem and their confidence that the query will be resolved diminishes as they are passed

around. They also feel they are being treated unfairly when there are price increases despite having signed up to a fixed contract.

'The problem with XXX was, you sign up for a year and then they change the prices straight away even though you signed a fixed deal and it was just really poor. Trying to get hold of them was really difficult; finding the right people to speak to; getting passed from pillar to post. It's just having no confidence in your ability to find the answer.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 1-9 employees)

'Really the gripe was a combination... they were going to hike up 8.5% and they weren't prepared to give a fixed rate to anybody who'd been a loyal customer for many, many years...'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; no employees)

Coming to the end of a contract gave businesses the opportunity to try and reduce their bills but also allowed them to find a company they felt happier dealing with.

'I did a bit of background and I thought I'd give them a go. Everything they said seemed to make sense... the call centre was English speaking, easy to get in touch with. I could deal with the same bloke every time; you weren't having to explain everything every time.'

(Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main source of information and advice; 10-49 employees)

Overall, most businesses that had switched said that the experience had been positive. Respondents that had used a broker suggested that their involvement made the process much more 'painless'. However, even where brokers were used, issues with the switch were still reported. One business in particular, when using a broker in the past, found the whole process frustrating. The existing contract was not terminated as the new one began and they were charged by both suppliers for the same time period and struggled to resolve the situation.

We ended up paying the old supplier and getting charged by the new supplier as well for the same period. There was a mix up on that and they said "Oh that's OK you'll get refunded" but it's taken some doing to get that refund. (Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main source of information and advice (most recent switch); 10-49 employees)

Two participants reported never switching their energy supplier. One had considered it but found the alternatives to be more costly. The other business stated it had been broadly happy with the current supplier. However, it was now considering its future options. It had recently moved to larger premises and price had become a greater priority.

3.3 Reviewing energy arrangements

Businesses said that they typically reviewed their energy arrangements with a view to switching a few months prior to their contract end date. They tend to be vague about exactly when they can do this, reflecting the fact that they tend to be unsure about their contract end/renewal dates overall.

Probably the 6 months prior to when the contract ends so I don't do it on an on-going basis. I don't review it every year, just literally 3 months or so before we're likely to get a renewal notice I'll start looking at it.

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

However, one or two businesses report that they review their arrangements more frequently. They do this to keep an eye on market prices.

'We do it every six months, just to have a look and see what the market's like.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

Some businesses expect penalties for early termination of a contract, so only take time to review their energy supply arrangements when their contract is coming to an end.

'...as and when the contracts come up... There is no other time for me to do it; I can't get out of the contracts. Not without paying large penalty clauses to get out of them. If you're fixed in on a contract you can't move, you can't change...'

(Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main source of information and advice; 10-49 employees)

3.4 Perceptions of choice in the energy market

When asked about their perceptions of choice in the energy market, most responses reflect businesses satisfaction levels with their current energy supplier. If they are satisfied with their current energy supplier, they are generally satisfied with the choice available in the market. However, a few respondents commented that suppliers were 'much of a muchness' with prices not varying greatly; with the market being dominated by the larger suppliers.

'The choice is fine, it's just the prices don't vary much. They're within a few pence of each other.'

(Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main source of information and advice; 1-9 employees)

This perceived lack of difference in price can make good customer service even more important for some. One business explicitly mentioned the significance of customer service to their choice of supplier when prices appear to vary so little.

'I tend to find that there's eventually very much a sameness eventually in the bottom line prices that you're looking for... it forces me to lean towards the service you're going to get and the availability of staff to discuss problems, rather than the price....' (Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main source of information and advice; 1-9 employees)

3.5 Key factors in selecting an energy supplier

As we have already discussed, price (followed by customer service) is generally the key driver in choosing a supplier. However, businesses cited a number of other considerations. These included:

- Transparency of costs and charges;
- Accurate billing;
- Flexibility – in terms of how contracts are structured across multiple sites;
- Energy from renewable sources.

Transparency in relation to costs and charges: Some dissatisfaction with the market in general stems from a perceived lack of clarity and transparency with regard to prices, terms and conditions. Some businesses said that there is too much complexity in the market, making it difficult to undertake direct comparisons between energy suppliers. There is some feeling that suppliers do not promote their tariffs widely. Differences in the way suppliers calculate and present tariffs causes difficulties for some when working out their cheapest option. In particular, extra or 'hidden' charges (such as standing charges) and varying rates for the time of day and level of usage caused particular difficulties.

'Some of the tariffs are... 'you get so many days at this and so many hours at that': it all gets a bit confusing. It'd be nice to just have 'It's going to be 20p per kilowatt hour and that's it.' ... I just tend to think "I'm not going to bother with that, I can't be bothered to work all that out, I'm going to go to the one that's got the clearest set up, really.'
(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; no employees)

'Upfront information and clarity so I know exactly what the rates are from the actual standing charge, the actual unit charge; no hidden costs or anything.'
(Not used a broker; switched 1-2 times in last 5 years; no employees)

Accurate billing: A few businesses mentioned accurate and timely billing as a factor in selecting (or remaining with) a supplier. They want to trust that the bill they receive will be right and that it arrives when they expect it to.

'You don't want to be overcharged and be in credit with a company, you want an accurate bill so you pay for what you use rather than overpaying or underpaying and having to pay a lump sum at the end.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

Flexibility of contract: Two businesses considered flexibility of contract a key factor in their choice. To them, flexibility meant that a supplier could provide suitable contracts where businesses had multiple sites (rather than separate contracts for each) and not being necessarily tied in for a fixed period of time.

'I've got 3 sites: 6 supplies; I've got 5 with one supplier. Can I get them all to come together to one? No I can't. Each of them are separate contracts; each of them are separate time frames: all expiring at different times and there seems to be no way that I can bring them together.'

(Not used a broker or price comparison site at all to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

Energy from renewable sources: A couple of respondents noted that they selected a supplier able to offer renewable energy, despite it being of a higher cost. They actively looked for a 'green provider' and wanted to support renewable energy. One of these respondents added that their slightly more expensive choice was offset by not having to pay the climate levy as a result.

3.6 Information sources

When researching different tariffs and/or suppliers, businesses rely on a number of different sources. This can include the use of a broker (either proactively or reactively), using price comparison of supplier websites, or contacting suppliers directly by telephone. A minority went further and relied on advice provided by consumer advisory bodies and their associated websites. Recommendations from other businesses also play a part for some.

'I get online usually and have a look and write them all down and then work it all out and give myself time.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; no employees)

'I also subscribe to things... and market analyst-type publications but we pick up on web research where we can and see who's good and who's bad in terms of the market and through experience with some of the companies we've had...'

(Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main source of information and advice; 10-49 employees)

Information sources were unlikely to be used in isolation. Businesses said that might typically use a combination of two or more different sources to ensure that they secured the best price for their energy contract. Several that used the services of brokers also contacted energy suppliers directly to verify the quote they had been given.

'... We go through a broker now.... even though the broker will come back and say something, I do my own homework as well; I don't take their word for it.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 1-9 employees)

A few noted that this reliance on multiple sources stemmed from difficulties in obtaining or understanding information using one, typically online, approach. One business who used a broker for example, had first struggled to find relevant tariff or pricing information on supplier's websites, whilst another had experienced difficulties understanding tariffs presented through a price comparison website.

4 Interaction with brokers, telephone services or price comparison websites

4.1 Contact with energy brokers or telephone services

Seven respondents had used the services of an energy broker to arrange their current contract. Most of these had been approached by the broker directly, whilst one business had actively looked for a broker themselves. Eight businesses had been approached by a broker directly, but had chosen not to take up their services

Interestingly, all businesses that we spoke to reported that they had been in contact with a broker in some form. Many said that they were contacted by several different brokers on a regular basis, particularly around their contract end date. Many businesses – including those that had actually used broker services – expressed their frustration with the high volume of cold calls they received from energy brokers. Most said they were called several times a week, with one company receiving three calls a day five times a week.

'I must have had more than 25 calls or more from this company even though I said I don't want any more calls. And it's different people and I keep saying the same thing, they keep assuring me that they've taken me off the list but I still get calls from them.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 1-9 employees)

'It can be irritating when you get too many [cold calls] in a week. I think mostly businesses who want to change companies know how to and they don't need the telesales to keep ringing them all the time to pressure them into changing...'

(Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main source of information and advice; 1-9 employees)

Businesses felt that levels of professionalism and styles of approach varied across brokers. Many respondents (including some that used broker services) stated that some brokers appeared to misrepresent themselves. Some said that they were working for an energy supplier, or would hook businesses into lengthy conversations before revealing their true identity. Brokers that immediately identified themselves and their purpose tended to be better received than those who did not. A few said that honesty at the outset was more likely to encourage businesses to engage in a conversation with a broker.

'I get calls from them all the time...; they pretend they're phoning on behalf of power companies and somehow are authorised or represent [them]... I don't talk to them. If they phoned up and said "I'm a broker, we can possibly save you money, I don't represent anyone. We'd be interested in working with you to see whether we can save you money... to see whether we can work out if we can get the best rates for you", then OK. But that isn't how they sell.
(Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main source of information and advice; 10-49 employees)

'We've got one bloke... It's actually quite funny; we know his phone number; if we don't answer the phone, he'll then phone up on an unknown number. So he's been really a... to put it politely, a pest.'
(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

One respondent recalled a particularly extreme case, where a broker demanded information from the business, threatening to cut off their supply when they were not prepared to engage in discussions.

'Most people are professional, you do get the odd one who seems to think I should be giving them all our contracts etc and he can be quite rude. There's been one person who's threatened us if we didn't give them all the information... [The threats were] "you're stupid", this, that and the other and "we can cut you off"
(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; primary (ABCDE), 10-49 employees)

Where businesses opted to use broker services, they tended to choose those that appeared to be professional, identified themselves from the outset, were not 'pushy' in their approach and provided time for them to consider their options.

4.2 Broker Services

The predominant service offered by brokers was assistance in finding the cheapest deal. A few (one micro and two small businesses) also used broker services to arrange their energy contract, with the broker being responsible for the administration and paperwork involved in closing and opening an account.

Some recalled being offered additional services, including energy management/ efficiency advice and, gas meter installations, as well as services for other utilities, such as water or telecoms.

4.2.1 Experiences of those who have used a brokers or telephone services

The number of offers provided by brokers varied. Some businesses received between three and four quotes, whilst others received only one. Respondents generally believed that these gave them sufficient scope to choose the cheapest option (for those businesses that said price was the main trigger for switching).

However, a few respondents receiving more than one quote, repeated the fact that there was often little to choose when it came to price.

Those businesses that said they had only received one or two quotes via their broker stated that they would have preferred more options from a range of different suppliers. A few businesses had a suspicion that brokers did not necessarily provide them with the best deals. There was a sense that that options might be deliberately limited.

'They presented us with a few, I'd say 3 [options]. I'd have liked to have seen more suppliers. It wasn't that difficult [to choose between them] because the one we decided to go with was a lot better than the others. [They] probably corner you into a few options, just a feeling I got.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

It's hard to say [if I got a competitively priced contract] because it's so hard to find out prices without phoning every single supplier and getting an individual price. I know it was a lot cheaper than XXX were quoting to re-do the contract so I'm reasonably happy but a little bit in the dark as well.

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

These concerns tended to stem from media reports regarding broker activity, or their own previous experiences of brokers not being upfront and honest when approaching them. In some cases, these views were influenced through conversations with other brokers.

'You speak to some [brokers] and they don't recommend other ones... I can't quite remember the conversation I had with one of [the brokers] but they said you've got to be careful which ones you go with.... Apparently there's different sorts of brokers and you've got to watch which one you deal with.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

One respondent also mentioned that brokers were reluctant to give them details of the suppliers the offers had come from until the switch had been completed.

4.3 Satisfaction of brokers amongst those that have used them

Those that had used a broker to arrange their current contract tended to be satisfied with their experience overall. One of the key benefits of using a broker was perceived to be securing a cheaper price from their energy supplier.

'I think the broker we used last time lumped our contract in with a few others and got a bulk price... which isn't something that's open to me individually because I negotiate for a company. So I saw an advantage in that. Whether that was just sales talk or not I don't know but he did get the best price that I saw so I went with the broker.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

Many respondents observed how easy it was for brokers to arrange the contract. They saw this as beneficial; brokers were able to draw upon their industry contacts and expertise in order to undertake all of the 'legwork' on the businesses' behalf.

'Well they can sort of do all the hard work for you, instead of having to trawl through a load of websites to find what you require.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

'The main benefit [is] they know who to call and have got the contacts to get the prices so I don't have to go around the houses doing it especially when it seems so hard to find out prices.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

Businesses also appreciated the fact that the broker took responsibility for the administration side of setting up the contract and ensuring all the paperwork was in place.

'I suppose they sorted everything. They sent through a letter that I signed and sent back and they sorted everything out so it was all done for you.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

Respondents that had used a broker were largely satisfied with the extent and clarity of information provided. There were positive reports of brokers providing confirmation of pricing and service information in writing and dealing with queries in a timely fashion. Respondents also said that brokers provided regular updates as to how their contract was performing.

'They were very clear and everything they've told me they've then emailed through immediately so I've got time to read it, check and if I'm not happy with something I can get hold of them.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; no employees)

'Very satisfied [with the broker I found]. He would give me an email every year showing me how much we had saved by fixing... I also could phone him up if I had a query halfway through the year, if my directors wanted anything clarified, all I had to do was email him and he'd come back with the answers.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

None of the businesses that used an energy broker said that they had paid a fee for the service and some were informed upfront that the service would be free. They widely believed that brokers are paid commission by energy suppliers, rather than by businesses themselves.

'I think I asked him on the phone as to how they make their money and he said it's a commission for the sale to the company rather than us being charged a fee. I think it was probably pitched as a free consulting service.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

'I think one of them once told [us] that they didn't charge anything to us, they got it through the companies they were dealing with or something or other.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; no employees)

One respondent did, however, share a slightly negative experience of using a broker service. Although satisfied with the price of the chosen supplier, the respondent was dissatisfied with the administrative element of the broker service, as the broker had not cancelled their previous contract or completed the paperwork for their new contract, both of which the business had to sort itself.

Another business stated that once they were with a broker, it was difficult for them to personally review their energy management. This responsibility had been handed over to broker who was allegedly not sharing this data with its client.

4.4 Interaction with price comparison websites

Several businesses had used a price comparison website at some stage when researching different suppliers and tariffs. However, only three participants had actually used one to arrange their current contract.

It's worth noting that price comparison websites in the business sector **generally** work differently to domestic ones. Businesses have to enter their energy use details on the website. A representative of the company will then contact them, after assessing the range of suitable tariffs for that particular business. This proved to be useful; giving the businesses the information they needed to make decisions and allowing them to ask questions. Other businesses outlined a number of reasons for not using a price comparison website to arrange their current contract. These included:

Lack of sufficient options: One respondent recalled only receiving one offer through the website, whilst another only received offers from the larger suppliers, rather than the smaller, independent companies they preferred.

Difficulties in comparing tariffs on websites. Particular elements of the tariffs caused confusion, including extra or 'hidden' charges, such as standing charges and varying rates for different times of the day or levels of usage. This can lead to businesses staying with their current supplier.

'I've gone on to comparison websites but it's confusing, so confusing and I spoke to the guy there and they were no better so I just decided to stay where I was and have a look at the deal I've got with them and stay with them.'

(Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main; 10-49 employees)

High cost options: In a couple of instances, the offers provided through websites were similar to, or more expensive than, current supplier prices, so it was not worth switching.

'I went to two different comparison websites... they obviously sent us quotes... [they] were higher values than the quote we got from our current provider, so we continued with them.'

(Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main source of information and advice; 1-9 employees)

One respondent also struggled to find a comparison website explicitly for businesses.

'They weren't really for businesses, they were all for [domestic] consumers. I didn't find one where I could check business rates without it effectively being a broker anyway and getting follow up calls ... so I just went straight to the

broker, or a couple of brokers.'
(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

4.4.1 Experiences of those who have used a price comparison website

There were mixed experiences amongst those that had used a price comparison website. Businesses typically received between three and five offers, (although the respondent receiving five offers had used two separate comparison sites). Most respondents were satisfied with this number.

Most found the tariffs and prices clear and easy to understand although a couple of businesses did experience some difficulty understanding this information. Their suggestion was that tariffs in general were complex with standing charges making price comparison more difficult.

'... It's when you got half a dozen to ten different tariffs ... Standing charges are a pain; they may put the price of the electricity down, but the standing charge goes up and people get caught out that way.'

(Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main source of information and advice; 1-9 employees)

As with the range of offers received from brokers, there was also a view that there was a lack of price differentiation between the options presented by price comparison websites.

4.4.2 Future use of TPIs in general

The majority of those that used a broker would consider using them again in the future. One respondent stated that they would use a price comparison website and contact suppliers directly instead. They were sceptical as to whether they had secured the best deal through the broker.

'If I could deal direct... I'd be a lot happier than going through these brokers. Everything's so complicated now; I've always dealt direct with people so I know where we stand.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

This view was echoed by a minority that said they would undertake more research in the future, and would look to contact brokers directly rather than wait for brokers to proactively contact them. This was not as a result of any particular negative experience, more the result of an awareness that brokers vary in their levels of professionalism and an underlying distrust of unsolicited approaches.

'I don't have anything against brokers as a rule, but I do realise that there's good brokers and bad brokers. That's why next time I'm looking to negotiate, I'll try and research brokers..., rather than wait to hear from someone who phones up and offers a brokering service or an agency service, you just don't have idea what they're like.'

(Mainly used a broker to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

4.4.3 Experiences of businesses that have not used TPIs

Nine of the businesses that we spoke to had not use a TPI to arrange their current contract. These businesses tended to research tariffs and energy suppliers by contacting different suppliers directly, either by telephone or visiting their website. The use of wider internet research and word of mouth recommendations from peers also played a part when they considered their energy options.

These businesses cited a variety of reasons for not wishing to use a TPI of any description. These included:

Perceived costs involved in using a broker. A few respondents shared concerns that brokers profit from the business. This perception appeared to be based on the conclusion that brokers have to make a living.

'They've got to make a living out of it. I just think you're paying them to do your legwork for you so you might as well do your own legwork and save that money.'

(Not used a broker or price comparison site at all to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

'... they might be looking for the best price for you but they're only doing it for one reason, because they're getting some money out of it.'

(Not used a broker or price comparison site at all to set up current contract; 1-9 employees)

Ability and willingness to undertake research into different tariffs and suppliers themselves. Some businesses prefer to retain control over the process and obtain the information directly. The main reason for some appears to be that they want to avoid dealing with brokers.

'I can go out and make some informed decisions and approach people for comparisons without being hassled to death which is what she [a broker] was trying to do.'

(Not used a broker or price comparison site at all to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

Maintaining a direct relationship with suppliers. There was some feeling that dealing direct with suppliers will enable businesses to capitalise on loyalty. They feel that this loyalty will result in being rewarded for this with competitive prices and good customer service.

'I might not get the best price but I'll certainly get a very keen price and know who I'm dealing with. I'm a very loyal customer, if someone supplies and looked after you well I don't like changing. I'm a bit old-fashioned like that.'

(Not used a broker or price comparison site at all to set up current contract; 10-49 employees)

Brokers' 'pushy' or 'pestering' approach. Some businesses did not see the need for an aggressive sales approach. Continued persistence and hard sell was off-putting in terms of brokers selling their services to them.

'She was extremely persistent, very annoying actually. Because [the broker] was so annoying, there was no way I was going to deal with them anyway.'
(Not used a broker; 10-49 employees)

Calls from overseas call centres. One or two respondents that contact from overseas call centres can also be off putting. It made them less likely to want to engage with a broker that used them.

Poor past experiences. Negative experiences of brokers also influenced businesses likelihood to consider using one again. For example, one respondent said that a broker had cost the business thousands of pounds. The broker had set their business up with the wrong energy contract which had proved costly and difficult to resolve.

'We're involved with a broker who got it completely wrong. We ended up on an emergency rate fixed in for a year which cost us thousands that we couldn't get out of... my experience of them, of trying to get them to take responsibility for what they did or didn't do, was difficult...'
(Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main source of information and advice; 10-49 employees)

5 Suggested improvements to broker services

The following suggestions were made for improvements to TPI services. Businesses suggest that these improvements would make them more likely to consider the use of a broker.

- Fewer unsolicited calls from brokers;
- The proper identification of the broker's firm at the outset of the call;
- A more co-operative approach from brokers when dealing with businesses; working at a pace required by the businesses, rather than applying pressure to act before businesses have had the time to give options full consideration;
- Brokers to provide a larger number of tariff and contract options;
- Tariff and contract options to be based on a wider variety of suppliers; providing options from both larger and smaller suppliers;
- Greater differentiation between tariff and contract options; more detail/explanation of differences between options from brokers when presenting them to businesses;
- Clear and timely communications;
- Statements/updates from brokers highlighting progress and savings made during contract periods;
- Brokers taking care of all necessary administration on behalf of businesses in ending existing and setting up new contracts.

Appendix I: Sample details

The following table provides a breakdown of the sample. Quotas were non-interlocking and included broker/TPI usage and switching behaviour. Respondents could be classified in more than one quota.

Table 1.1: Breakdown of sample; target v achieved

| Characteristic | No. of contacts | Target | Achieved |
|---|-----------------|--------|-----------|
| Industry (SIC 2007³): | | | |
| Primary (ABCDE) | 191 | 4 | 3 |
| Construction (F) | 79 | 3 | 3 |
| Retail/wholesale (G) | 111 | 3 | 2 |
| Transport/food/accommodation (HI) | 161 | 4 | 4 |
| Business services (JKLMN) | 125 | 3 | 3 |
| Other services (PQRS) | 129 | 3 | 5 |
| Business size: | | | |
| 0 employees | 126 | 3 | 3 |
| 1-9 employees | 428 | 8 | 8 |
| 10-49 employees | 242 | 9 | 9 |
| Nation: | | | |
| England | 571 | 16 | 17 |
| Wales | 86 | 2 | 2 |
| Scotland | 139 | 2 | 1 |
| Broker/TPI usage; switching behaviour*: | | | |
| Consulted/approached by broker when choosing current tariff but not used as main | 287 | 7 | 8 |
| Mainly used a broker to set up current contract | 225 | 7 | 7 |
| Mainly used a price comparison site to set up current contract | 95 | 4 | 3 |
| Not used a broker or price comparison site in the main to set up current contract | 476 | 7 | 9 |
| Switched once or twice in the last 5 years | 393 | 5 | 13 |
| Switched multiple times in the last 5 years | 108 | 5 | 5 |
| Have switched in the last 12 months | 219 | 7 | 10 |

³ SIC 2007 – Standard Industry Classification 2007 – see Appendix for detailed breakdown of SIC 2007 codes

| Characteristic | No. of contacts | Target | Achieved |
|--|-----------------|-----------|-----------|
| Considered switching (never switched) | 151 | 3 | 2 |
| Never switched | 274 | 0 | 0 |
| All respondents | 796 | 20 | 20 |
| <i>*multiple response i.e. respondents can fit into more than one category</i> | | | |

Introduction and briefing (5 minutes)

Introduction:

- Interviewer to introduce themselves and BMG Research
- Thank them for agreeing to take part in the discussion

Overview of the research: BMG Research has been commissioned by Ofgem, the independent energy regulator in Great Britain. It wants to understand more about micro and small businesses' - that is businesses with up to 49 employees – experiences and perceptions of energy broker services, for example, phone services and price comparison websites. These are collectively known as Third Party Intermediaries (TPIs for short). Ofgem is also keen to hear how your business engages with the energy market overall, for example, your experiences of switching supplier and how you consider your energy options. This is building on research you were involved in earlier this year.

Interviewer to probe for company policy that prevents respondents from using energy broker services to shop around for or arrange energy contracts. If that is the case, thank and close.

Confidentiality: I work for BMG Research, an independent research company. We will not identify any individuals taking part in this research and we will not disclose your personal details. Your responses will be treated in the strictest confidence as observed by standards determined by the Market Research Society.

- Your views will not be attributable to you. The more open and honest you can be the better. There are no right or wrong answers; it's just your views or opinions that count.

Recording: we would like to audio-record the discussion for the purposes of accurately capturing all the information you share with us. The audio will be used for analysis purposes only and will not be shared with anyone outside of BMG Research.

Provide opportunity for respondent to ask any questions.

Seek permission to audio-record. Switch microphone on. Once switched on, confirm that the audio-recorder is on for the benefit of the tape.

Notes for the interviewer

- These interviews are expected to last approximately 30-40 minutes in duration and will be organised at a time convenient for the interviewee.
- This interview is to be undertaken in an open ended way to allow the researcher to capture information key to the research whilst enabling flexibility to pursue lines of enquiry based on interviewees' responses.
- The topic guide is structured to cover the key issues and views within each subject area – if the interviewee feels there is any duplication then assure them that all questions being asked are to ensure we understand their views and to ensure nothing is 'assumed'.

Warm Up

Interviewer to ask respondent to introduce themselves.

Can you tell me a bit about yourself:

- First name
- Role in business (should be user/purchaser of energy services)

Can you start by telling me a little bit about your business, the sorts of products/services you provide, how many staff you have, and where you are located?

Interviewer to take note of whether respondent meets the recruitment criteria - in addition to other information gained during the discussion, this will be required to complete the respondent validation section on the depth diary.

What types of energy does your business use? What do you use it for? How important is gas or electricity to your business?

How satisfied are with the choices you have within the energy market? Why is this?

What are your preferences when engaging with the energy market – what represents 'best value' or 'best service' to you?

In your view, what works particularly well or not so well within the energy market? Why is this?

Current Arrangements

Can you describe your current contract arrangements? *Interviewer to probe for:*

- Which supplier are you with?
- How long have you been with them?
- Is it a fixed term, on-going or roll over contract?
- What is the length of the contract?
- When did it start?
- Did it involve switching suppliers or tariff? **IF YES**, why did they choose their current supplier/contract/tariff? **IF NO**, why didn't you switch? Why did you stay with your current arrangements?
- How often have you switched, say in the last 5 years? What have been your reasons for switching in the past?

- How often do you review your energy arrangements? Are there certain times of year that you will think about it and look at options? Are there any specific triggers to reviewing these arrangements? What are they? What are the most significant? (*Interviewer to probe ... Are you aware of your contract end date or when you can start thinking about switching your supplier? Have you seen it on bills or any other supplier communication?*)

Interaction with broker/telephone service or price comparison websites

What have been your experiences of finding out about different tariffs and suppliers? Can you tell me how you arranged your current energy contract? Was this different to how you've organised energy contracts previously? **Interviewer to probe for:**

- Have you ever used or been contacted by an energy broker/telephone service or price comparison website? **Interviewer to be specific about the services used and when.** Who approached who? i.e. Did the broker approach you or did you approach the service directly? How do you feel about the way they contacted/dealt with you?
- What specific services did they offer to you? Why did you take up these services? Why didn't you take up these services? (*if struggling, prompt with... helped find supplier, arranged energy contract, energy management (review consumption, offer advice on energy efficiency etc.), looking after/managing the energy account on your behalf*).

Use of broker/telephone service or price comparison website

Interviewer to ask specifically about the different services used and differentiate views of each when recording responses.

WHERE USED A BROKER/TELEPHONE SERVICE OR PRICE COMPARISON WEBSITE TO ARRANGE CURRENT CONTRACT:

- How many offers were you given? How wide ranging did you feel the offers you received from the broker were? Were the offers from different suppliers or mainly one? How satisfied were you with the options you were given? Would you have liked to see more? Would you have liked to have seen fewer? How easy/difficult did you find it to choose from the offers you were shown? How confident are you that you were fully informed about the range of options available to you?
- Overall, how easy/difficult did you find it to compare options and to understand the terms and conditions of different contracts and tariffs?
- What other sources have you consulted if any (e.g. contacting suppliers directly, speaking to colleagues/other businesses)? Why did you go to other sources for information and/or advice?
- What have been the most useful sources of information for you?

How satisfied were you with the overall service the broker provided? What was your overall view of the service and how it was delivered? Do you feel that you got a competitively priced contract?

What were the benefits to using a broker's services? What were the drawbacks?

Was there a cost to you in using a broker? Were you aware of this at the outset? How have you paid the broker (e.g. one off cost, monthly fee etc.)? Are the costs of using a broker clearly distinguishable from the energy costs themselves?

How satisfied were you with the process of setting up the current arrangements using a broker? Interviewer to probe for: What have been the aspects of the process that worked well? What could be improved in future for you? What, if anything, would you do differently? Would you use a broker again? If not, why not?

WHERE NOT USED A BROKER/TELEPHONE SERVICE OR PRICE COMPARISON WEBSITE:

Have you used or considered using a broker/telephone service or price comparison website in the past? IF YES: Why haven't you used them?

How likely are you to use them in the future/when it comes time to review your supplier/contract/tariff again? Why do you say that?

Wrap Up

Interviewer to check for any final closing comments

Repeat assurances regarding confidentiality

Arrangements for incentives discussed where necessary

Thank and close



With more than 25 years' experience, BMG Research has established a strong reputation for delivering high quality research and consultancy.

BMG serves both the public and the private sector, providing market and customer insight which is vital in the development of plans, the support of campaigns and the evaluation of performance.

Innovation and development is very much at the heart of our business, and considerable attention is paid to the utilisation of the most up to date technologies and information systems to ensure that market and customer intelligence is widely shared.

