A logo of a sun with words

Description automatically generated**CSE response: Standing charges: domestic retail options**

**About Us**

We’re a charity supporting people and organisations across the UK to tackle the climate emergency and end the suffering caused by cold homes. We do this by sharing our knowledge, practical experience and policy insights. For over 45 years, we’ve supported people to take effective action on energy in their homes. We help communities and local councils to understand energy issues, set priorities, and put plans into action. Our research and analysis focus on making the energy system greener, smarter and fairer. Through our advice line, home visits and one-to-one support, we support around 22,000 people a year to reduce their bills and make their homes more energy efficient.

We deliver fuel poverty services for two of the electricity network operators and six local authorities. Through these services we support thousands of people of low incomes who often have multiple vulnerabilities. They are unable to navigate the energy market without our support. Our support helps them find an amicable solution to their issue which ultimately helps the energy supplier by lowering their unserviceable debt, reducing customer service enquiries and reducing the number of interventions they face from the ombudsman. Our response here is informed by the experience of the thousands of people we speak to in fuel poverty every year, and our own research exploring the path to net zero and ending fuel poverty.

**Question 1. Do you agree with the proposed Design Principles? Would you recommend any additional Design Principles?**

We think that the principles behind the consent solution are good. Building and maintaining trust is key to the success of this solution, and we are pleased to see that this is recognised by Ofgem.

We also support the Design Principle of “Inclusive by Design”. However, there is also a need to consider how this consent solution would impact inclusivity in the wider energy system.

Through our fuel poverty work and our [Smart Energy Action Plan project](https://www.cse.org.uk/news/helping-people-understand-smart-energy-options/), we speak to many digitally excluded people and support them navigate the energy system. They often have to rely on the support of organisations such as ours. Some have friends and family who can support them, but this is not always possible, particularly if they are socially isolated (e.g. living in a remote rural location). As the energy system gets smarter, we need to ensure those who are digitally excluded can still participate and are not left further behind by this consent solution.

One way of supporting this group of consumers would be to ensure there is a way for a trusted third party – like an advice organisation such as CSE - to be able to access the consent solution on the consumer’s behalf, with sufficient protections in place for the consumer. This would increase the number of digitally excluded consumers who would engage with the consent solution.

Other options to consider include the ability to access and engage with the consent solution via a phone or text service (e.g. operated by the Delivery Body), which is required to be promoted by suppliers and any smart offer provider looking to access consumer data. Many of the digitally excluded consumers we support also don’t speak English as their first language and need the support of interpreters – this should be offered as standard through any phone service.

We know that consumers without smart meters – whether it’s because they don’t want one, or can’t have one – are already being left behind in the energy system. Many of the smart energy options, such as time-of-use tariffs and demand flexibility service, are designed for those with smart meters, while those without are stuck on more expensive tariffs with no viable alternative. There is a risk that the consent solution further skews innovation in the sector towards those with smart meters, and those without get left with an ever-decreasing pool of tariffs and products. Ofgem should therefore consider the impact of the consent solution on further entrenching a two-tier energy system, which will ultimately risk our progress towards net zero.

With regards to the Design Principle of “Agile, Flexible and Scalable”, CSE would be interested in working with the Delivery Body to deploy the solution. Every year we support thousands of people in vulnerable situations navigate the energy system. Through projects like [National Grid Power Up!](https://www.cse.org.uk/my-home/advice-projects/national-grid-power-up-advice-hub/), [Warmer Homes, Advice and Money](https://www.cse.org.uk/my-home/advice-projects/wham-warmer-homes-advice-and-money/), and the [Bristol City Council Tenants Energy Advice service](https://www.cse.org.uk/my-home/advice-projects/bristol-tenants-energy-advice/), we support many consumers with advice and long-term casework over the phone or in-person. Much of our long-term casework support involves supporting consumers understand their energy bills and resolve billing issues with their energy supplier. The fact that the energy supplier is currently the only party able to access the consumer’s smart meter data means that supporting consumers with billing issues is challenging and time consuming for charities like CSE. Testing the consent solution with this group of consumers, if we as a third party could also view the consumer’s data, will enable faster issue resolution with energy suppliers, meaning that the people we support are less stressed and anxious, and our caseworkers can support more people.

With almost 4 million smart meters in the UK not working correctly [1], smart meter issues are very common among those who contact us for support. Being able to see a client’s smart meter data and whether their smart meter was communicating correctly would speed up how quickly we can resolve issues.

Through our Smart Energy Action Plan project, we support vulnerable consumers understand the smart energy transition, what capabilities they require to participate, and the smart offers, products and services that would be suitable for them. In these advice interactions, our advisors explicitly talk about data and consent with the consumer, to gauge their level of comfort with who can access their data and how they process it. Our advisors could support these clients explore this consent solution and provide valuable feedback. Also, a key emerging challenge for our advisors is how to advise on which smart tariff, product or service would be most beneficial to a consumer, given that the benefits of these are reliant on a consumer’s half-hourly consumption patterns. This is a major departure from traditional tariffs that are based on a consumer’s annual usage, which a consumer can more readily access and share with an advocacy organisation such as CSE. If a consumer was able to share their smart meter data with CSE, for example, our advisors would be able to provide much more tailored advice on the most beneficial tariffs, products and services, giving consumers greater certainty and confidence in their decision and increasing participation in a smart energy system.

**Question 4. Do you consider these standards are sufficient parameters to ensure inclusivity, accessibility and interoperability for the consent solution? Which standards would you recommend?**

As the standards mentioned (WCAG and WAI-ARIA) are accessibility standards for web-based content we would request that you consider whether there are other accessibility standards for whichever non-web based solutions that you decide to use. As we have explained in our response to question 1 we believe there is a need for a well thought through non-digital option for the estimated 10 million people in the UK who do not have basic digital skills [2]. Gov.uk suggest that phone lines are an accessible option: “*Disabled people generally have less access to the internet than non-disabled people. The telephone is an important channel for making information accessible to your audience. Crucial information, for example about pensions, benefits, health, council and income tax needs to be found easily by everyone who needs it. Many disabled people, and especially older people, will not have access to the internet or may have difficulties using it. The telephone can be a very important method of communication for these groups” [3].* Information provided only in a digital format does not fulfil Public Sector Equality Duty requirements which we would expect this solution to follow. Many of our clients can only communicate with services via the support of a third party. Therefore, we would like to see an explicit inclusion of the fact that advice organisations and third parties should have some way of supporting people to change their consent preferences in order to ensue accessibility for all.

Sources

[1] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cz9zqn77ezno>

[2] <https://www.lloydsbank.com/consumer-digital-index.html>

[3] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication/accessible-communication-formats>