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COMPANIES WIN AWARDS FOR HELPING VULNERABLE CUSTOMERS

- **Award scheme spreads best practice among electricity distribution companies in improving priority customer care and communications**
- **CE Electric UK and EDF Energy receive £300,000 each for going beyond their obligations to help vulnerable customers**
- **CE Electric UK receives a further £400,000 in recognition of breadth of work to improve communications with customers.**

Electricity network owners CE Electric UK and EDF Energy are to each receive £300,000 from a reward scheme run by energy regulator Ofgem to recognise work that exceeds licence obligations to support vulnerable energy customers.

In addition CE Electric UK will receive a £400,000 reward to recognise work to build closer links with its customers through improved communication. Both companies demonstrated a holistic approach to understanding and meeting their vulnerable customers' needs and embedding good communications practice.

The scheme was set up by Ofgem as part of the electricity distribution price control for 2005-2010. The electricity distribution network operators (DNOs) submit details of measures where they have exceeded their licence requirements to help vulnerable customers who, for example, may depend on electricity supplies to keep medical equipment running. A separate award was given to recognise CE Electric UK's wide-ranging initiatives, including work with community and welfare organisations, to improve communications with their customers.

The entries were judged by an independent, multi-disciplinary panel with representatives from Age Concern, RNID, RNIB, the Public Utilities Access Forum (PUAF) and energywatch.

Panel Chair, Sarah Harrison, who is Managing Director for Corporate Affairs at Ofgem, said: "CE Electric UK and EDF Energy deserve particular recognition for the creative approach they have taken to supporting vulnerable customers. CE Electric UK is also to be congratulated for the wide range of initiatives it has taken to improve communication with customers. In both cases, these companies demonstrated a clear commitment across the business, from top to bottom, to their work to help vulnerable consumers and improve communications.

"This is the second year of Ofgem's award scheme and it was clear from the range and quality of the applications that the companies have built on the first year's experience and are improving customer service beyond their licence obligations. In every application, the panel saw examples of innovation and best practice in priority customer care or communication - all of which deserve recognition."

All DNOs are obliged to keep records of vulnerable customers and CE Electric UK and EDF Energy demonstrated thorough work to update their records, add additional customers and provide them with services beyond the core minimum. Customer service staff at both companies received training from organisations such as the Women's Royal Voluntary Service and EDF Energy worked with disability charity MENCAP to build knowledge of vulnerable customers' needs. EDF Energy also used talking newspapers and hospital radio initiatives to engage with vulnerable customers.

CE Electric UK has worked on wider communications strategies by setting up an external language line providing translation into over 100 languages. It also distributed update newsletters to all parish councils and has raised awareness among customers by working with community groups, MPs and the media.

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Quotes from other members of the judging panel:

Dr Mark Baker, Head of Social Research and Policy at RNID, said: "From automatically sending text messages to deaf and hard of hearing customers, to taking part in RNID's Louder Than Words Chartermark scheme, electricity distribution network operators have shown a committed and imaginative approach to the needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing customers. RNID congratulates all entrants, as well as Ofgem for rewarding good practice and innovation. Awards such as these will continue to raise standards for potentially vulnerable customers."

Patrick Keaveney, Project Manager for RNIB, said: "The quality of the submissions was considerably superior to the previous year. More attention was being paid to making information and marketing material accessible. It's a customer focus thing - making information accessible is all about knowing exactly what your customers need. One very notable example of excellence was a DNO contacting local talking newsletters to publicise the existence of the priority service registers and it is hoped other DNOs will do this. "

Audrey Gallacher of energywatch said: "I was impressed not only by the range of new initiatives introduced by the electricity distribution businesses, but by the implementation of best practice from last year's scheme. The network operators, and Ofgem, deserve congratulations on how effective this awards initiative has been in improving services and communications to vulnerable consumers."

Gill Owen, Chair of the Public Utilities Access Forum, said: "My congratulations go to the winners of the awards but I was also impressed with the submissions from the other DNOs. It is clear that the award scheme can help to raise customer service standards and improve communication with them. I was also pleased to see that the DNOs were able to demonstrate what impact their work is having through feedback from staff and customers."

Gretel Jones, Housing and Communities Policy Adviser for Age Concern, said: "Age Concern is pleased to have been a judging panel member for the first two years of this scheme. All of this year's applications showed improved support for vulnerable consumers, showing that the scheme has had a positive effect in improving standards of service for older customers. It is particularly important that older people are contacted, helped and kept informed when there are power cuts or similar crises in supply and we welcome the services the electricity distribution network operators now offer in these circumstances. We very much hope the awards scheme will be introduced into the gas distribution networks in the near future."

Notes to Editors:

1. DNOs have a number of licence obligations regarding help for vulnerable customers, for example in the event of power cuts. Performance against these obligations cannot always be effectively measured through price control regulation. Therefore the Electricity Distribution Price Control for 2005-2010 established a customer service reward scheme for DNOs, which recognises where they have exceeded these obligations. It also promotes best practice for all DNOs which will raise standards of service and support.

2. The scheme for 2006-2007 scheme had two categories

- Wider communication strategies implemented by DNOs including liaison with health authorities, local authorities and welfare organisations to communicate with hard to reach customers, and
- Initiatives to help priority customers such as the elderly, the disabled or people suffering from long-term sickness. DNOs are required to maintain a register of priority customers who require advance notice of planned interruptions to supply because they depend on electricity for medical reasons or have special communications needs. DNOs also need to liaise with energy suppliers who operate Priority Service Registers and offer a wider range of free services to vulnerable customers.

3. DNOs were invited to submit entries to these awards, which were judged by a multi-disciplinary panel with representatives from: Ofgem, energywatch (www.energywatch.org.uk) the Public Utilities Access Forum (www.puaf.org.uk) RNIB (www.rnib.org.uk) RNID (www.rnid.org.uk) and Age Concern (www.ageconcern.org.uk). The scheme has a total annual reward of £1 million available across all DNOs for the five years of the price control.

4. Ofgem is currently reviewing the price controls for the gas distribution networks between 2008 and 2013. As part of its initial proposals for the price control, Ofgem is consulting on the merits of introducing a similar scheme for the gas distribution networks.

5. 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, the Electricity Act 1989 and the Utilities Act 2000. In this information note, the functions of the Authority under the relevant Acts are, for simplicity, described as the functions of Ofgem.

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