

## Counsel and Care consultation response

### Monitoring suppliers' social initiatives - proposed reporting framework

June 2008

#### **About Counsel and Care**

Counsel and Care is a national charity getting the best care and support for older people, their families and carers. We work with older people and their carers to ensure they are aware of and receive their rights and entitlements, and promote choice and control in later life. We operate an advice service which deals with around 250,000 enquiries per year, through telephone calls, emails, letters and our website. The frequency of contact we have with older people and the issues raised through this service are used to inform our campaigning and lobbying work.

#### **Counsel and Care's response**

Counsel and Care has considered the consultation document released by Ofgem on 30 May 2008 and has a number of comments to make on its proposals.

Counsel and Care is encouraged to hear Ofgem's announcement that administrative costs for running the Home Heat Helpline (0800 33 66 99; [www.homeheathelpline.org](http://www.homeheathelpline.org)) will be included in the extra £225 million for vulnerable customer initiatives. It is also reassuring to see moves towards ensuring that all customers on low incomes are put on the cheapest social tariff that their supplier offers, rather than what has conversely happened in the past –

those most vulnerable, older customers on low incomes, often put on more expensive tariffs. However, there is still a way to go.

Our concerns about the future of a vital telephone advice service – the Home Heat Helpline

Counsel and Care has been concerned for some time about the future status of the Home Heat Helpline – a vital telephone advice service for vulnerable older people on low incomes. Currently, the Home Heat Helpline has 35 specially-trained advisors who have helped over 65,000 people on low incomes over the last two years with paying their fuel bills, by letting them know how they can access a range of grants and find a payment scheme that suits their needs.

Despite record profits reported by some of the big six energy providers, the future position looked bleak. While only costing the big six energy providers £900,000 a year to run – a drop in the ocean when compared with these record profits – it seemed that funding for the telephone advice service was due to end later this year.

Older customers have the right to be able to easily access information and advice

The current financial climate combined with the impact of rising fuel bills and the ever-increasing cost of living makes the value of the Home Heat Helpline service for older people on low incomes ever more pertinent. Recent research now estimates that 1.5 million<sup>1</sup> older people are in fuel poverty in 2008, which is a staggering increase of 250,000 within just a year. Frail older people on fixed incomes are among those most at risk from the loss of the Home Heat Helpline's support and advice. It is vital that older people prepare properly for the winter months. Every year, there are excess deaths among older people which can be linked directly to cold weather. This must stop.

---

<sup>1</sup> Spotlight Report 2008, Help the Aged  
Counsel and Care  
June 2008

In particular, Counsel and Care was concerned that from this autumn, the telephone part of the advice service would cease and the big six energy providers would jointly provide a website and automated telephone line only.

It is important that both Ofgem and the energy providers recognise that many of the older people needing information prefer getting this advice via speaking to a specially-trained adviser over the telephone, and many older people do not have access to the internet. *It is vital that Ofgem actively continues to support the Helpline to remain in operation, both as a web-based advice service, but more importantly for older people, as a telephone advice service.*

One expert source of information on how to manage your fuel bills

The energy industry, the energy watchdog and the government must all commit to working together in cooperation in order to meet the target of eradicating fuel poverty in vulnerable households by 2010. To achieve this there needs to be one expert source of information on how to manage your fuel bills, heating grants and benefits. Otherwise, those customers on low incomes without access to the internet will lose out, widening the gap between rich and poor. Without telephone advice services such as Home Heat Helpline, older people will continue to struggle to remain living independently in their own homes.

Counsel and Care

Twyman House  
16 Bonny Street  
London  
NW1 9PG

[www.counselandcare.org.uk](http://www.counselandcare.org.uk)

For more information or clarification about anything included in this response, please contact Anna Maloney at [anna.maloney@counselandcare.org.uk](mailto:anna.maloney@counselandcare.org.uk) or 020 7241 9523.