

Referral of Vulnerable & Off Supply Cases by Advice Agencies to Consumer Direct & Consumer Focus

Background

1. Consumer Voice has a duty under the CEAR Act to assist consumers who are disconnected or who are threatened with disconnection, including prepayment off supply cases. It has also agreed to exercise its power to assist vulnerable consumers who are unable to deal directly with their energy or postal supplier and who are referred by Consumer Direct. A vulnerable consumer definition has been agreed through the Customer Journey Working Groups for use by Consumer Direct.
2. The major energy suppliers have agreed to provide referral routes for use by advice agencies into specialist or escalated teams. This arrangement will initially be available to CAB and Age Concern, but is likely to be extended to other agencies in future.
3. Where cases cannot be resolved directly with the suppliers, it will be necessary for advice agencies to contact Consumer Direct and where appropriate the case will then be referred to Consumer Focus. It is therefore necessary to ensure that a clear and effective process is established for referral of vulnerable consumers contacting Age Concern, CAB or other advice agencies to Consumer Direct and Consumer Focus.

Principles

4. CAB and Age Concern would normally seek to resolve the consumer's problem by providing advice or by using the escalated referral routes agreed with the energy suppliers, but this will not always be possible. Consumer Focus will also provide an "Advise the Advisor" service and make access to its Knowledge Base available to advice agencies, to help equip advice agency staff to handle more complex issues.
5. Where a case being handled by the advice agency meets the agreed criteria for referral to Consumer Focus, the referral process operated by Consumer Direct should ensure that the transfer is made expeditiously and that the consumer or adviser does not need to repeat case information twice.
6. The referral process should be simple to use and easily understood by all advice agency staff.

Proposed Referral Process

7. Where the advice agency is unable to resolve a vulnerable or disconnection/off supply case, which falls within the remit of the Consumer Focus Extra Help Unit, contact should initially be made with Consumer Direct. This may be by:

- Providing the consumer with Consumer Direct's telephone number
 - The advice agency contacting Consumer Direct and either passing the telephone to the consumer or by the agent speaking to Consumer Direct on behalf of the consumer.
8. The approach to be followed by Consumer Direct will need to reflect the actions which have already happened and specifically whether the advice agency has already attempted to resolve the case using the escalated referral arrangements in place with the suppliers. A copy of the Consumer Direct Northampton guidance note is attached as Appendix A.
 9. Where the escalated referral arrangements have not been used, Consumer Direct will need to establish whether it is appropriate for the case to be referred to the supplier or if it needs to be passed to the Extra Help Unit.
 10. Where the escalated referral arrangements have already been used but the case has not been resolved within an appropriate timescale and the advice agency can confirm that the consumer meets the agreed vulnerable definition (including disconnection/off supply cases), Consumer Direct will normally refer the case promptly to the Extra Help Unit.
 11. It is likely that the majority of referrals of advice agency cases will be by mid-call transfer. For these cases, Consumer Direct will only need to capture minimum information prior to the call transfer, with details of the problem being provided directly to the Extra Help Unit after the call is transferred. If a mid-call transfer is not appropriate and an email referral is used, Consumer Direct will need to capture full details of the case so that the Extra Help Unit can progress the complaint without needing to contact the consumer for further information.
 12. For simplicity, these referral arrangements will apply both to disconnection/off supply cases and to vulnerable cases.
 13. Once agreed, these referral arrangements will be incorporated into guidance notes by CAB and Age Concern for use by their advisors, and will also be reflected in the referral protocols between Consumer Direct and Consumer Focus. A review of these arrangements should be undertaken after 3 months of operation.

Appendix A

Consumer Direct Northampton - Briefing Note for Use when dealing with Calls from Advice Agencies

If a call is received at CDN relating to an energy or postal matter and that call is made by an advisor at an Advice Agency e.g. CAB, Age Concern, then the following guidelines should be adhered to:

1. Establish what the agency has already done to resolve the issue. This may include;
 - a. The agency offering advice to their customer on their rights and how they can resolve the issue themselves.
 - b. Using the Consumer Focus “Advise the Advisor” service and the supporting Knowledge Base.
 - c. Making use of the supplier to agency dedicated lines.

If the agency advisor has done none of the above then they should be encouraged to do so. If they have made a reasonable effort to resolve the case then CD will:

2. Determine if Consumer Direct can offer further assistance through either;
 - a. Advice and information to either the agency advisor or the consumer themselves,
 - b. A referral to the appropriate company
 - c. a referral to Consumer Focus EHU because the consumer falls into the definition of a “disconnection/off supply or a vulnerable consumer” case.
3. If the consumer does fall into the definition of the above then:
 - a. Where possible the agency advisor or consumer is transferred through via warm, Mid Call Transfer (MCT) to the EHU backed up by an email. In this case basic details of the case should be taken and passed through to the EHU.
 - b. If this is not possible then a email referral should be made, again marked appropriately and containing the relevant information. In this case full details should be taken of the case and passed through to the EHU.