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15th July 2016

Dear Jonathan

Response to statutory consultation on the Priority Services Register review

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your final proposals for changes to the Priority Services Register (PSR). This submission is non-confidential and may be published on your website.

Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland (jointly the Citizens Advice Service) have contributed throughout the consultation process and are pleased to see a set of final proposals that broaden the approach to vulnerability beyond the old 'tick-box' approach and will hopefully renew the drive across the industry to ensure priority services are offered to those consumers who need them.

With regards to the final amendments to the draft licences, we acknowledge that many of them are drafting amendments that require no further comment. We only respond here to the amendments that we feel imply a change to the obligations of the licensee.

Firstly we welcome the clarity provided by the additional clause 26.1(b) that ensures licensees take 'all reasonable steps' to promote the PSR. The current take-up of services is very low compared to estimates of those eligible. It is clear that the industry could and should be doing more.

The other three changes constitute relatively minor relaxations in the obligations of licensees as compared to the conditions proposed in December. However, while these are relatively small changes, we believe it is necessary to highlight where we think these amendments give rise to a need for further clarity, outside of the conditions, to ensure consumers' interests are protected.

The Citizens Advice Service understands the rationale behind the changes to the consent requirements. Setting the bar too high, in terms of engagement, before a vulnerable consumer can receive a service, may exclude many consumers from getting essential support. However our research has shown the importance to consumers of transparency and control over who is using their data and how. With opportunities for creating and sharing data about energy consumers increasing, we believe there is a need for a framework that clarifies the rights and obligations of data users across the industry. We accept that the PSR is solely about the provision of free services and that the risk of this information leaving a consumer worse off is low. However the sensitivity of the information needed for the register means the same principles of transparency and control should apply, with a clear ability for the consumer to amend or withdraw their personal details should they wish to do so.

The new drafting that allows suppliers to consider other occupiers of the household who could read a meter before providing that service themselves is sensible and consistent with drafting elsewhere in the licence conditions. However the Citizens Advice Service would like to ensure that suppliers are aware of the need to keep records of such arrangements up to date so that a change in household circumstances does not leave a vulnerable consumer unable to provide accurate readings.

Finally we feel that the alterations to the definition of 'personal characteristics' in the new draft licenses could potentially have the effect of compromising the open and flexible approach to vulnerability that is at the root of this review. By making the licensee the judge of which additional characteristics should be included under this term, consumers may find it more difficult to insist that they qualify for the services. While 26.1(a) maintains the open approach to vulnerability, there may be a need for both the Citizens Advice Service and Ofgem to inform a supplier where we feel they have failed to identify a relevant personal characteristic.

If these changes to the Priority Services Register are to be successfully implemented, energy companies will need to ensure that training is provided to their employees across their organisations and that feedback is collected from consumers on how effective they think the new arrangements are. We look forward to working alongside Ofgem throughout this process.

Best regards

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