

Results of research on unreliable switching

A report on qualitative research conducted for Ofgem with energy customers who had encountered problems when switching

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1. Executive summary

As part of their switching programme, Ofgem is currently looking to reform the change of supplier process in order to deliver a more reliable switching process for customers.

It is essential that the programme delivers reliability and cost-effectiveness. In order to do this, Ofgem would like to understand the current attitudes and perceptions of consumers towards the switching process, specifically when it goes wrong. It is important that Ofgem understands the practical, financial and emotional impact an unreliable switching experience may have on customers, as well as any effects this may have on their overall engagement with the market. Uncovering insight in these areas will help Ofgem develop solutions which make the switching process efficient, reliable and fair for all.

This research concentrates on customers who have experienced a failed switch, a delayed switch or an erroneous switch (where a customer is switched without their consent or agency, usually because another person's legitimate switch has been incorrectly allocated). We screened members of our panel using a short quantitative questionnaire, and then followed up with potential respondents to confirm whether they were in scope. The research was then conducted through qualitative interviews with the final sample.

Ultimately these customers felt let down by energy suppliers. Their perception was that their experience of unreliable switching created problems for them that in some cases significantly impacted their lives. Often they felt they had been required to invest an undue amount of their time and emotional energy into resolving issues that ultimately they felt they had not created.

This impacted their perception of the market as a whole and in some cases made customers wary of switching suppliers again, regardless of whether a supplier was directly involved in their original issue. This was particularly true for those who had lost out financially during the process, e.g. those who were billed by both suppliers during the process.

The main issues that customers highlighted with the switching process were:

- Suppliers rarely notify the customer of the problem, they generally “discover” it for themselves by getting in contact with the organisation
- Suppliers also rarely take ownership of the problem, leaving customers to take the lead, or requiring them to liaise with their existing and new suppliers, effectively acting as a “go between”

Set against the backdrop of everyday life, consumers did not feel that these problems were hugely significant. But the practical, financial and emotional impact was enough to promote a negative view of the energy market and affected their propensity to switch in future. Those who had experienced an erroneous switch were the most frustrated group of customers as they felt a problem was imposed on them “out of the blue” that they were left to try and resolve with little help from suppliers

The main impacts of unreliable switching on customers are:

- Financial impact is highest for those whose switch has failed, as they have likely lost out on potential savings. Also customers who have a delayed switch tend to spot the delay later if only one fuel is delayed, rather than both/all their fuels being delayed. This could mean that they suffer greater financial impact, from not spotting the problem early. Customers are rarely offered compensation for any actual losses and never offered goodwill gestures (both of which they feel would be desirable, especially compensation for lost savings which they feel should be mandatory).

- Time impact varies depending on the customer and supplier's relative proactivity. However failed switchers tend to spend a considerable time chasing suppliers over a period as long as 12 months.
- Emotional impact is highest for erroneous switchers, who can suffer anxiety from concern over their supply and billing.

In addition, we found that customers would be happy both to share additional information at the start of the switching process and also for their data to be shared on an industry database, provided it was secure and only used for effective switch processing and especially if this could mitigate against others experiencing the problems they had.

2. Background, method and sample

2.1 Background and context

As part of their switching programme, Ofgem are currently looking to reform the change of supplier arrangements in order to deliver faster, more reliable switching for customers.

It is essential that the programme delivers reliability, speed and cost-effectiveness. In order to do this, Ofgem wants to understand the current attitudes and perceptions of consumers towards the switching process, specifically when it goes wrong.

It is important that Ofgem understands the impact of unreliable switches, both during the switch and the impact on customers' overall engagement with the market after this. Doing so will facilitate their work to improve the experience for customers, make the switching process efficient, reliable and fair for all.

2.2 Objectives

The overarching objective for this research was to gain a better understanding of how a small minority of domestic consumers are affected by reliability issues with switching from their perspective

Within this, Ofgem were interested in understanding:

- Consumer experiences during an unreliable switch, including their expectations of the process in comparison to what happened in reality
- Emotional, financial and time impacts that the experience of an unreliable switch has on consumers
- How an unreliable switch impacts future energy market engagement.

2.3 Research approach

A sample of potential participants was recruited using a quantitative recruitment survey administered to Populus' consumer panel. This methodology was seen as the most fitting as it meant Populus could contact a large amount of potential respondents (over 22,500 panelists were invited to take part) ensuring a wide representation of people were included in the study. We also sent out survey invites to respondents in proportions that matched the GB population, to make sure we weren't oversampling any particular demographic groups.¹

These potential respondents were further screened to ensure that they were "in scope" i.e. met the technical requirements to be interviewed for the project rather than self-defining as having had a problematic or unreliable switch.

In order to qualify, respondents also had to have experienced the issue within the last calendar year (i.e. after June 2016). A potential respondent was recruited to take part once they had selected scenarios that were in scope for one of the four potential research categories in the table below (a detailed breakdown of qualifying scenarios for each category can be found in the annex of this report)

They were then invited to be interviewed qualitatively over the telephone. These depth interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were conducted in June/July 2017.

¹ Invites were sent, taking into account likely response rates. So groups who are less likely to respond to surveys were relatively oversampled, to ensure that the final group surveyed matched the GB population.

The final sample after 2 waves of recruitment and additional screening was as follows:

Switching problem experienced	Number interviewed
Failed switch (the switch did not go through)	3
Delayed switch (either single fuel switched and delayed or dual fuel switched and both delayed)	5
Delayed switch (one of dual fuels switched was delayed, the other was switched successfully)	4
Erroneous switch (i.e. the customer's account was switched without their knowledge or consent)	3

Demographics	Number interviewed
Gender	
Male	8
Female	7
Age	
18-34	7
35-64	5
65+	3
Country	
England	10
Scotland	4
Wales	1

3. Customers' experience of unreliable switching

3.1 Background and context to the switch

3.1.1 Overall motivation for switching

There were several drivers to switching, most of them financial.

- **Necessity:** i.e. being on a budget and so looking for ongoing ways of reducing spend to fit within restrictions
- **Awareness** of perceived gradual bill increases (the cultural “mood music” of increasing energy bills impacted on some customers who felt that progressive increases could no longer be ignored and thus looked for a better deal)
- **Serial savers** : i.e. those customers constantly on the look-out for a better deal across a range of their spending and consuming habits
- **Dissatisfaction** with current provider's service (this was rare in our sample – most switching was financially rather than service driven).

3.2 Switching experience prior to problem occurring

3.2.1 How the switch was made

In our sample, all switching was initiated by customers – no-one reported having been actively “sold” to by an energy supplier.

The majority had used price comparison websites (PCWs) and initiated the switch through those sites. They used PCWs because they believed them to be a simple and effective means to switch, via a one-stop shop.

“We were looking at price comparison websites and we entered how much we were paying and what package we had and then it just popped up that they could find a cheaper provider. All we had to do was click on the button [to switch]” (Delayed switch)

A minority used PCWs but did not switch through the site. After determining a suitable tariff, they then contacted the supplier directly – usually by phone.

“I had a look at all the companies (on PCWs)...and someone had already said that [Provider] were coming out as the cheaper option at the time. So I went on their website and basically gave them a call” (Failed switch)

A couple had a supplier recommended by a friend, but still “triangulated” deals using a PCW.

One hypothesis is that the use of PCWs and the corresponding expectations of speed, ease, and simplicity could be impacting on customers' expectations of the switch. It could also impact on the expected immediacy of the supplier response if something goes wrong with the switch. If a customer used a PCW for simplicity and minimal effort, then they will be frustrated by having to put additional, unexpected effort into resolving a problem.

3.2.2 What did the customer have to do to switch?

Whilst most customers used a PCW in part to minimise the effort required to look for a different supplier/tariff, all customers had to supply a range of information to initiate the switch. In addition to supplying personal information such as their address or postcode, the key pieces of information that customers reported they had supplied (for PCW and “direct” route) were: current usage (quarterly or annually); current bills; current package/fuel tariffs; bank details (for setting up a Direct Debit) and in some cases meter details.

The initial process of starting a switch was generally seen as a simple and relatively low effort process, contrasting in many cases with the degree of effort required to resolve problems caused by the switch. This tension is important to bear in mind, as the greater the distance between expectations and actual experience, the greater the likelihood of dissatisfaction. This can potentially lead to disengagement from the market in the future. Conceptually, switching problems could have a negative effect on the effectiveness of the energy market.

3.2.3 Expectations once the switch was initiated

The general context for expectations is set by the use of PCWs, as mentioned earlier, and in some cases past experience of switching. Specific expectations were shaped almost entirely by the response (which were either automatic or prompted by further contact on the customers part) from either the energy providers or the PCWs. Responses often detailed how long the switch would take and typically said there was nothing more that the customer needed to do. Timings varied with PCWs and suppliers claiming that the switching process could take anything from 1 week to 5-6 weeks, although most respondents recalled it was generally between 2 and 3 weeks.

“[The PCW] took us to the [supplier] site, I input the details again... and we got an email from them saying that all our services would be switched from their end, we wouldn't have to do anything else and it would be done within a week” (Delayed switch)

Some customers had positive experiences from switching previously. These experiences transferred into their positive expectations about how effortless the process should be for their switch.

Therefore customers approached their switch under the assumption that it would happen within the timescales they had been told it would, with minimal further effort on their behalf. In some cases they did not necessarily check or monitor further until the problem arose, assuming that everything was happening in the background.

3.3 Experience once the problem occurred

3.3.1 How customers found out about the problem with their switch

A key finding is that very few customers were notified by their existing or new supplier that there was a problem. They tended to “notice” or discover that there was a problem themselves e.g. when they received a bill/statement from the “wrong” supplier.

There were several different ways that customers realised something was going wrong with their switch:

- **Partial confirmation** of a switch, in the case of delays where only one fuel is switched (in the case of a dual fuel switch)

- **No confirmation** of the switch when customers expected the switch to have been completed
- Receiving a **bill from their “old” supplier** indicating to customers that the switch had not yet taken place
- Receiving a final **bill for one fuel but not the other**, again indicating that something had gone wrong with a dual fuel switch

“I received a bill from the old provider, there was no mention on there of any transfer. I looked on the (PCW) website and it was still showing that the transfer was in progress” (Failed switch)

Depending on the specific issue that customers experienced, they tended to find out about the problem in different ways.

For those who had experienced **failed switches**, unexpectedly receiving a bill from their current supplier was often the first indication that there were problems with the switch. These customers were completely unaware that anything had gone wrong until they received this communication. Even active switchers are not particularly engaged on a day-to-day/week-to-week basis with their energy accounts and thus do not actively monitor the status of their switch.

In the case of those with **delayed switches**, in many cases customers assume that the switch has gone through even if they do not get a confirmation or welcome pack from the new supplier. At some point they then realise that the switch has not yet happened either within the timescale they were given by the new supplier OR within what they consider to be a reasonable timescale. The customer perception of what a “reasonable timescale” differed from person to person with some basing it on what they had been told by the supplier and others on “gut feel”, however the majority of our sample usually realised within 5 weeks.

“It all went kind of quiet because we assumed it had gone through, but then we realised they weren’t supplying us...” (Delayed switch)

“The 14 days were up, and it still hadn’t happened. I got a phone call from the provider to say they were having problems” (Delayed Switch)

For those customers who had **one of their dual fuel switches delayed**, the prompt varied but could well be receiving a bill or statement for only one of the fuels that they thought they had switched from either the new or existing supplier. It was also related to other activity in their account. For example, one person noticed that only one fuel was showing on their new online account and one was still showing in their old online account. In one case the new supplier only asked them for a reading for one fuel which suggested to the consumer that there might be an issue with the other fuel.

“I think it was when I got the closing bill from my old provider and it was only for half, only for the electricity. Then I noticed the gas account was still open [with the old supplier]” (Delayed switch, one fuel first)

“I got a message to say the electricity would be switched, but no mention of the gas” (Delayed switch, one fuel first)

At this stage they might also receive some indication as to the cause of the problem, for example the supplier had an issue identifying the customer’s address. In some cases, customers were informed

that there was a problem completing the switch because of an issue with their smart meters i.e. they were incompatible with the new suppliers systems. This minority of customers were not necessarily made aware of why their smart meter was presenting a problem for the switch.

In the case of **erroneous switches**, whilst by definition all customers had no prior knowledge that their energy had been switched in error, the ways in which they made the discovery differed.

In one case the customer who previously had both fuels with the same provider, noticed that the gas had “disappeared” from his online account. Assuming there was an error of some sort, the customer contacted the supplier to find that the gas had been switched a few months earlier. The customer had not noticed as it was for a second property that was currently unoccupied so the energy use was low and thus the online account was not monitored regularly.

One customer discovered that their account had been switched when they received a bill/statement from the new supplier, and because they were not expecting this, they interpreted the correspondence as a bill and a refund and so assumed it was an error that had been resolved. It was only later that they confirmed they had actually been erroneously switched.

Another customer received a text from their current supplier to say that there was a problem with a switch they were processing – a switch that the customer had not initiated.

*“I got a text message from my current supplier saying regarding your meter...that I was supposed to be switching but there was a problem”
(Erroneous switch)*

Customers’ responses ranged from bemusement to surprise and confusion when they found out about the switch. The impact of the erroneous switch tended to grow as customers experienced difficulty in resolving the issue quickly and satisfactorily.

3.3.2 Expectations of problem resolution

At this stage the expectations of all customers can easily be summed up as follows:

- Expecting the **supplier(s) to sort out** the problem and to proactively take a lead rather than expecting to have to do the work themselves
- Expecting suppliers to get the **switch back on track** quickly, correctly and efficiently (excepting customers who are erroneously switched).
- But **not necessarily expecting compensation or goodwill gestures** of any description. This may be due to a lack of understanding on the customers’ part about how difficult the problem could be to resolve and so in turn whether they would be eligible for compensation or goodwill gestures.

Customers generally expect (or at least hope) that suppliers will take ownership of a problem if it has been caused by them/if it is not the customer’s fault. In addition, customers feel their custom and satisfaction is worth the investment of effort by a service provider to retain their business. Thus in a situation where an energy switch has not gone smoothly because of an issue not of the customer’s making, the expectation is that suppliers will step up and sort it out.

In situations where it is not clear to the customer which supplier might be at fault or might be best placed to resolve a situation, they feel strongly that suppliers ought to be able to work together behind the scenes to resolve the problem for the customer. This is in line with expectations of switching prior to a problem occurring – namely that it will be simple, quick with suppliers communicating effectively with each other without the customer having to intervene.

“I expected it to go more smoothly than what happened....you would have expected a straightforward switch between the two companies” (failed switch)

Customers who had experienced an **erroneous switch** all expected to be able to revert to their previous supplier quickly, without any objection.

3.3.3. What was the actual customer experience?

All situations followed a similar trajectory, but the time taken to resolve the problem, customer time invested, effort expended and resulting effect on attitudes to switching in the future could vary. However, most experienced the following:

- After discovering they had an issue, customers would generally contact their new supplier (or old supplier if it had initially raised the issue with the customer)
- There would then be series of phone calls and email contacts between the customer and the supplier(s) to try and (a) find out what the nature of the problem was, (b) why it had happened and especially (c) what needed to happen to get the switch back on track. This was often to seen to be a protracted process
- In the case of delayed switches, resolution would mean that the switch would finally happen
- In the case of failed switches, the customer would reluctantly give up on the switch
- Final confirmation/resolution communication was inconsistent
- If the customer had directly lost out financially in some way (e.g. being on a higher tariff for too long) then in a minority of cases they would be compensated for any substantiated financial loss. No participants in the research were offered goodwill gestures of any kind.

Customers who experienced **failed switches** were typically confused about why the switch had not happened. The reasons consumers reported included having a meter that was problematic for the new supplier and moving into a property with outstanding debt.

Customers who experienced meter related failed switches (e.g. those switches that initially are confirmed as able to go ahead but then fail due to the new supplier being unable to support their meter), were disappointed, confused and frustrated by the realisation that they would not be able to switch (and the personal time they had wasted). However, they were ultimately resigned to being unable to switch.

A customer who had moved into a property with an unpaid debt was told that she could not switch. She reported that the responsibility for sorting out the issues (e.g. finding where the previous tenants had moved to) fell on her rather than the supplier and this was felt to be unfair and frustrating. Ultimately she abandoned the switch and stayed with the existing property supplier who offered her a slightly improved deal.

In the case of those customers whose switches were **delayed**, the issues often revolved around inaccurate details being recorded (for example address and meter details). Customers went through the same process of leading the problem investigation and resolution, making multiple contacts to one or both suppliers and submitting additional information etc.

In the case of delayed switches of **one fuel when a dual fuel switch was requested**, customers often found out quite “late” or whilst checking other account details. Again, they felt that the responsibility on finding out why the issue had arisen and how to resolve it was down to them. Participants in this research tended to have experienced a delay in their gas switching with the electricity going through as they expected.

They reported a lot of toing and froing with phone calls and contacts to try and resolve the issue, with both suppliers blaming the other for the error. The explanations for what had happened were often deemed unsatisfactory, e.g. an unspecified “system error” – leaving them with a sense that the switching process and suppliers are less organised than they should be. Again the effect on customers could be more than inconvenience, as some ended up paying overlapping direct debits which could cause household budgeting issues.

Interestingly, customers said that they would still prefer one fuel to be delayed rather than both at the same time. Their belief was that this would potentially require even more work to resolve (essentially double the effort).

In most cases of **erroneous switches**, the customer contacted their new and/or old suppliers to query the issue, find out what had happened, why and how to resolve it. In some cases it was difficult for customers to know who the new supplier was.

After contacting the new and/or old supplier, customers then embarked on a series of customer driven investigations. They needed to contact, re-contact and chase suppliers to try and get the situation resolved. Suppliers were not perceived to be particularly helpful and did not appear to take any ownership of the problem. Some had difficulty getting new and old suppliers to communicate with each other and had to lead the process of resolution themselves. Generally, consumers indicated that they felt a sense of confusion and powerlessness when an erroneous switch happened.

Not all customers felt they were given adequate explanation about what had caused the erroneous transfer. All felt that, if possible, they should have been notified as soon as the switch was initiated to ensure that they really did want to switch.

One customer, suffering from mental health issues, found the process so difficult that they had to move in with a friend. They were worried that their electricity pre-payment account would no longer work and so they would have no electricity to cook/heat water etc. This situation was particularly distressing because of his circumstances, making resolution more difficult and time consuming. Whilst this is an extreme case, he was not unique in the difficulty experienced in resolving the erroneous switch.

“I went to my mates because I didn’t have any electricity, I had an electric oven and couldn’t use it” (Erroneous Transfer)

3.3.4 How much effort did it take for customers to resolve their issue?

Just as the actual time taken to resolve a problem varied considerably from a matter of 2-3 weeks to several months, the amount of time invested by the customer tended also to vary. While respondents struggled to total the exact time spent on contacting supplier, customers, at least, would contact their supplier on one or two occasions. Some customers would regularly call suppliers for a few weeks to resolve an issue.

Customers felt that the fact that they had to put in so much effort, indeed that they had to drive the process in most cases, was unexpected and unacceptable. They felt that if a problem has been caused by a supplier, or the interaction between suppliers, then those companies should own the resolution process, thus reducing the amount of effort the customer needs to invest.

“It was us constantly chasing them. We wished someone had logged all our calls because every time we got through to someone it was like we had to start the process again and tell them we’ve been calling for 3 months and to please do something about it. That person would be like ‘don’t get annoyed, I don’t know what’s going on’ ” (Delayed switch)

Customers tended to become more annoyed with the process as time went on. This was down to the frustration of having to lead the process, being referred from one department to another leading to the need to repeat themselves on every new call with no progress being made along the way.

In some cases, the customer felt they had to escalate the enquiry to a making an official complaint. Although, for some, irrespective of how frustrated they said they were, they did not take the matter further. Although they said that the situation was time consuming, exasperating, annoying (and for some very worrying), it still was not always perceived to be severe enough to raise an actual complaint.

“On the third time I registered a complaint with them and then they really sat up and took notice...” (Delayed switch, one fuel first)

During the research, we observed some differences between the effort put in by customers across the different scenarios. Whilst each respondent had their own particular circumstances, they often reported the following themes:

In the case of **failed switches**, customers had to put in a high degree of effort as they often had to investigate technical details, submit additional information and chase both current and old suppliers, acting as a go-between in some cases. This could lead to a higher degree of frustration on the part of these customers and contributed to putting them off the switching process entirely.

Those whose switches had been **delayed** sometimes expressed a lower assessment of the effort they had to invest. It might be phone calls/emails to chase progress if there hadn't been any communication within a given timescale, but this very much depended on the individual circumstances of the delay and the knock on effect (for example where there was a financial impact, the effort spent tended to be higher to try and resolve the problem quickly).

Those who had **switched one fuel and the other had been delayed** had to invest an increasing amount of effort as the problem continued. This was from the (often late) realisation that one switch had not happened, with a call or email to find out why, through to growing effort required to chase both suppliers, obtain and provide additional meter details or address information etc. This may be because some of these delays are technical failures that are then resolved, and so do not just eventually resolve without some customer effort.

We asked consumers how the process could have been improved once their switch issue had been discovered. All customers expressed surprise and in some cases dismay that they were expected to lead the resolution process, to chase suppliers etc. and thus a key improvement they asked for was for suppliers to be more proactive at all stages and for there to be less effort on the customers part to reach a resolution.

Customers do not entirely understand what happens, how suppliers will know what has happened and which supplier should possess this knowledge and act on it but they do not see this as their responsibility – and they certainly do not see the resolution as their responsibility. Rather, one or both of the involved suppliers should work together to proactively notify customers of any issues as early as possible (even at the point of trying to make the switch) and then to resolve any issues arising as quickly as possible involving the customer only when necessary.

Customers experiencing an **erroneous switch** as with the other switching issues detailed in this report, reported that the onus was on them to make calls to try and resolve the situation. Arguably in this instance, greater effort was required. Not only did they need to lead the resolution, contacting companies etc. they also had to understand what the situation was and how it had come about as they had not initiated the switch.

“They just kept sending me back and forth...they told me to contact this new supplier so I called them. But they told me to go back to the old supplier” (Erroneous Transfer)

3.3.5 Supplier effort

Customers definitely felt that when there were problems, the onus was on them to resolve the issue, often acting as a go between, rather than the suppliers taking a proactive lead or responsibility. However, respondents did report a small number of cases where suppliers had demonstrated a little more care and effort. For example, in one case it was the current supplier that had alerted the customer to the problem before they discovered it themselves. In other cases, suppliers did try and progress the issues quickly, but only after the customer had told them about it. These instances were not specific to any single type of switching problem.

“He apologised for the inconvenience...told us that because of the type of account we had with the old supplier, they would need further info from us. So he took all the information over the phone, he was absolutely lovely and quite apologetic even though it wasn’t his fault, and he basically got it all sorted for us and to expect the [prepayment meter] key and the letter within the next week or two” (Delayed switch)

The area where suppliers appeared to be willing to expend more effort was attempting to retain a customer. Whilst this is “business as usual” for switching any service, when there is a problem customers feel that different rules apply. The emphasis should be on expediting the switch and not using the delay as an opportunity to retain their custom. We were told that this only happened on a couple of occasions. But where it had happened the customers were unhappy with the practice, feeling that it was against the spirit of the market.

“They did want to keep me with them, and the person I spoke to took a long time trying to persuade me to stay and not transfer over...” (Delayed switch)

Customers who had experienced an **erroneous switch** felt that suppliers did not appear to make much of an effort to resolve the situation. All participants who had experienced an erroneous transfer felt that they had made far more calls to each of the suppliers, than the suppliers made themselves.

One participant recalled that when they had spoken to the two companies, one of the employees was quite open and honest about the fact that erroneous transfers can be quite commonplace. This did not provide any practical help to the customer, but at least they knew they were not alone with their issues.

“One person I spoke to at the supplier said this is not the first time this has happened, they said it’s not unheard of for people to be switched without consent. It didn’t seem to come as a huge surprise to them” (Erroneous Transfer)

3.3.6 Time taken until resolution

Customers' expectations around resolution varies depending on the type of issue they have experienced. For those whose switch eventually goes through, this is the moment of resolution. For those whose switch fails, resolution is the realisation that the switch has failed and cannot be saved, and then the customer chooses either to stay with their existing supplier or to start the process afresh with a new one.

However for the vast majority of respondents, they said that the effort to resolve the issue on their part was often considerable and unacceptable (even though they could become resigned to a protracted process). Some were led to believe that it would be a set time by suppliers, but the actual experience was a lot longer. In the worst case, a respondent reported that it took the supplier 12 months to resolve the issue.

“6 months...it literally got to that extent where we thought they're not going to get in touch with us, so it's not our fault and we felt we were in limbo” (Delayed switch) “It was very time-consuming as well. Obviously we've both got full time jobs and to have to deal with this in the evenings too...7 hours on the phone” (Delayed switch)

Resolution for customers **erroneously switched** was nuanced. For one customer, resolution was staying with their new supplier, and so was essentially instant, although they were not greatly satisfied with the outcome. For another customer, while they were returned to their supplier in a short space of time, they had ongoing metering problems which had persisted for a year.

3.4 Resolution

According to respondents, resolution tended to “just happen” at the end of the process rather than formally communicated when it had been reached by the suppliers. Whilst some might have received an informal apology from customer service staff whilst dealing with an issue, once the problem had been resolved, few customers reported having received an apology. A few said they received compensation i.e. a financial offer that covered costs that they paid during the process (for instance some had to pay two electricity bills at once). However none received a goodwill gesture, defined here and by customers as an extra gift that goes “above and beyond” what they are owed financially, such as a gift certificate or an unexpected percentage taken off their next bill.

“I didn't get any compensation, just a 'sorry' in an email” (Delayed switch)

In the case of **failed switches** where the customer was assured the switch would happen at the start, only to discover later that it was not possible (not due to meter incompatibility issues), resolution was being informed of this fact. This left consumers disappointed rather than satisfied and sometimes presented them with a more significant problem i.e. having to start what they now feel is a difficult process all over again OR having to stay with a supplier they were potentially unhappy with. Those we interviewed with these types of failed switches had not made future financial plans based on the savings they were hoping to make. As the failure was often linked to an issue that could cause problems with engagement in the future (for example, the type of meter), they were less likely to engage in the market again.

For **delayed switchers**, resolution was the switch finally going through, which was satisfactory for most. Most customers experiencing a delay were able to return to continue 'as normal' once the switch had happened.

Similarly, where **one fuel had switched before the other**, customers felt their issue was resolved once the delayed part of the switch had gone through. They were happy to invest no further effort in trying to understand why the problem occurred, if they lacked that understanding to begin with.

Resolution for customers **erroneously switched** meant being returned to the previous supplier but also that arrangements were as they had been. Of the three people interviewed who had been transferred erroneously, none felt that the problem had been resolved satisfactorily at the time of the interview, even though some had been switched back.

It took one customer 6 weeks to get their electricity supply back with their original supplier (during which time they moved out of their house for a week because they believed they had been cut off). However at the time of interview they still believed their gas supply was in limbo between two suppliers and so the problem wasn't resolved. Another customer had been returned to their old supplier, but they were still unable to submit meter readings (the initial trigger that something had gone wrong). Due to this fact, they felt on consideration that the issue wasn't resolved.

The third customer who had "given up" trying to be returned to her previous supplier and so decided to stay with the new supplier as the deal she was on with them was no worse and the additional effort she anticipated having to make to fully resolve the situation would have been too much. She was not happy with the situation but was pragmatically resigned to this semi-resolution.

"The hassle factor...it's done now and I don't want to go through all that again" (Erroneous switch)

3.4.1 Goodwill gestures and compensation

We asked whether compensation and/or goodwill gestures could make up for some of the negative impact from an unreliable switch. In spontaneous discussion, customers were unclear between the difference between compensation (i.e. money to compensate a specific loss/costs incurred, such as money lost by not being on a desired tariff for the intended amount of time) and goodwill gestures (i.e. receiving money in good will to make up for the hassle incurred). They tended to use terms interchangeably and did not always make a distinction between being offered a payment to cover a lost saving and the concept of getting something as recompense for inconvenience and worry. However when we probed specifically on these two areas, there was some distinction in their response.

3.4.1.1 Goodwill gestures

Respondents struggled to articulate what value they would attach to either compensation or a goodwill gesture. People whose **switch had failed** were a little unsure about how this would work as they were often not sure whose "fault" the failure was. Often it was a technical issue and so the supplier, whilst they may have not contacted the customer or been proactive in seeking a resolution, was not actually the root cause of the problem as they saw it.

People who had experienced a **delay** (to both fuels, or just one fuel) tended to feel more confident in attributing responsibility to one or both of the suppliers and thus felt more certain that a goodwill gesture, if it was to be offered should come from the supplier who had caused the delay. However when suppliers blamed each other for the fault this could confuse delayed switchers, making them unsure of who to ask for goodwill gestures.

No participants who experienced an **erroneous switch** were offered any form of goodwill gesture. When asked if this had been offered, they were more likely to be dismissive of the thought, as it never came up in any of their conversations with suppliers who appeared not to want to take ownership of their problem let alone offer any form of recompense.

3.4.1.2 Compensation

Compensation was a different matter. A small number of customers interviewed were offered compensation for money they had “lost” by a switch being delayed (once it had been completed). The compensation was calculated to specifically cover the estimated value that had been lost through the delay in moving to a cheaper tariff and did not include any additional money to cover the cost of phone calls or a goodwill payment to cover time spent and inconvenience.

Customers who received this felt that it was fair, even unexpected, but it did little to change their opinion of the switch, the supplier and their propensity to switch again in the future; it was seen merely as redressing a financial imbalance.

“They directly compensated me. They worked out the difference between tariffs and they compensated me” (Delayed switch, one fuel first)

Once made aware of the possibility of compensation, those who did not receive any were disgruntled by its absence.

“We thought there might have been some kind of financial compensation but there was nothing. They just whacked us with a full bill...” (Delayed switch)

Customers thought that compensation for money lost through the switch should be provided as a minimum. Ideally, some form of recompense for additional costs could also be covered. Some people felt that time, inconvenience and worry could also be compensated for but few could articulate what this should be.

As with the question of goodwill gestures, customers who had experienced a **failed** switch were both unsure about whether the fault was attributable to a particular provider and they also felt that they had not technically lost out as their switch could not have gone through. Thus whilst they might be frustrated at having wasted time and whilst they might have expected suppliers to have been able to notify them/stop the attempted switch at an earlier stage, they did not feel that compensation was necessarily appropriate for their situation.

Those whose switch had been **delayed**, on the other hand, were in no doubt that compensation should be forthcoming from the supplier(s) at fault. All had switched for a financial gain and so the absence of that gain through no fault of their own should attract compensation. Customers for whom only one fuel (e.g. gas but not electricity) was delayed, tended to have learnt of the delay later than customers for whom all fuels were delayed. Thus the financial “losses” for these customers could be greater and compensation should be proportionate to the actual loss.

Whilst the **erroneously switched** customers we spoke to did not feel they had lost out (in terms of a different tariff) and thus did not expect compensation for loss of savings as with delayed switches, in some cases the cost of dealing with the issue could be quantified and should be taken into account e.g. the cost of telephone calls.

“I’d say the time I’ve spent on the phone, about £10, I was using pay as you go” (Erroneous switch)

4. Impact felt by customers due to unreliable switching

4.1 Overview

The impact of the switching problems that people experienced varied to an extent according to the type of problem they had (failure, delay etc.) but was driven more by their individual circumstances.

We asked about, and customers spoke spontaneously about

- **practical** impact, largely related to the amount of **time** they had to spend and the disruption to their general plans;
- **financial** impact, which could be related either to the temporary or permanent loss of a saving that customers would have benefitted from or disruption to household budgeting if provision had to be made for an unknown spend/unexpected bill, two direct debits running simultaneously etc.;
- the resulting **emotional** impact which the switching problem had on people which varied from minor to more significant depending on the individual's circumstances and the financial impact in particular and ranging from mild frustration through to a high level of anxiety.

For those whose switches **failed**, the impact could be quite high. They often had to spend a lot of time chasing suppliers to discover what the problem was (which had a practical/time impact), found out that they would not be benefitting from the saving that they had hoped for and perhaps needed (financial impact) and were, correspondingly frustrated and upset at the time by the failure of the switching process (emotional impact).

For people whose switch was **delayed**, the impact might ultimately be lower. They did manage to switch, but the inconvenience and stress of the process of getting the matter resolved, as well as the financial impact of not benefitting from the anticipated saving (and even expenditure on phone calls) tended to heighten the impact. A further financial issue associated with all types of delayed switches was the potential to be “doubling up” on payments while the delay was sorted out, both of which could raise the overall level of emotional impact.

For people who had a **delay on one of two fuels switched**, the impact was lessened by the fact that they did manage to resolve the issue by switching the delayed fuel eventually. However, the inconvenience and complication with this type of switching problem and the potential delay in “noticing” that one fuel was delayed meant that there was a financial impact (doubling up on payment, even bill shock when the second fuel was finally switched) and a resulting negative emotional impact.

For people who had been **erroneously switched** the financial impact was low. However the emotional impact could be very high, especially for vulnerable customers. An erroneous switch can cause high anxiety and uncertainty about a customer's energy supply and supplier. Also the practical/time impact varies considerably, depending on the desire of the customer to get the problem fixed and the supplier's proactivity.

Looking at the different ways that switching problems impact on customers we can see that practical impacts and financial impacts influence the emotional impact. This also influences customers' overall attitude to engaging with the energy market and switching in the future.

4.1.1 Practical/Time Impact

For some people, the practical impact on their life/time was more to do with the irritation/annoyance/frustration than the actual time taken. However, some had worked out how long they had wasted trying to contact their suppliers to resolve the issues. They generally saw this as wasted rather than investment to achieve the switch they wanted.

“I have probably taken up three hours in time on phone calls and emails.” (Failed switch)

In some cases, the time taken to resolve the issue (or indeed to end up in stalemate with a switch failing) was very lengthy. We were told that that this could be as high as 12 months. Within these time frames, customers had to make numerous attempts to resolve or mitigate the issues involving regular chasing of the suppliers. These protracted processes were more prevalent with delayed switches (of both types) than failed switches. However, the length of time taken to resolve an issue (and therefore time invested/wasted by the customer) could be lengthy in any scenario.

In the specific situation of **erroneous switches**, it can take a lot of time to investigate and subsequently attempt to resolve this type of problem and participants felt that they had to put in more effort than was fair, with suppliers apparently reluctant to take responsibility or to help.

As previously mentioned, the actual time taken did vary between people with estimates of upwards of 3 hours to much more. However, all felt that the time they spent was somewhat inefficient and unnecessary and not just because this was not a situation of their making; rather they experienced being passed back and forth from old to new supplier with neither apparently willing nor able to take control of the situation on their behalf. This added more time and contributed to an increase in the stress and frustration that they already felt. One customer also felt that if the problem dragged on any longer, that they would consider raising a complaint with the Ombudsman, further adding time to the process.

“They should pull their finger out and get on with it. Why should the onus be on the customer? They’re the ones who switched me” (Erroneous switch)

4.1.2 Financial Impact

All customers who tried to switch (i.e. not those who were erroneously switched) said they were switching to save money. Service was only a contributory factor for a minority of customers. Those customers who were on a tighter budget or who were keen to use their energy savings to balance their household budget in other areas, were particularly impacted by failure or delay in the switch.

For those on a pre-payment meter, the “limbo” of perhaps not being able to top up has very real consequences (practical, financial and emotional) e.g. not being aware of which supplier to top up with. Direct debit (DD) customers could also be impacted financially, by having to juggle their budgeting to pay two DDs for a period or anticipating a larger one off bill payment when the switch finally happened and payments were consolidated.

“The new company wanted to sign a DD mandate upfront...you pay a month in advance, so there was the DD for the old supplier and the DD for the new supplier, hoping it would all switch in time and the DD for the old supplier would be cancelled, but it didn’t and I ended up paying twice” (Delayed switch one fuel first)

For people who had been erroneously switched the financial impact was low. One individual said they had spent around £10 on phone calls trying to resolve the problem, but otherwise there was no direct financial loss from the erroneous switch experiences .

4.1.3 Emotional impact

Customers can be affected emotionally, independently of the time and financial impacts, simply because they find the process frustrating or stressful.

We saw a range of emotional impacts, depending on the individual. This ranged from general annoyance and frustration to more serious levels of stress which, in two instances, exacerbated preexisting emotional/medical problems. In one extreme case, a respondent was convinced that the delayed switch had led to her suffering from an epileptic attack, resulting in her being hospitalised.

We had the slight fear that our energy would be cut off. We've got 3 kids in the house and we can't exactly allow the energy to go off at any point because the kids need heating...I had 5 minute seizures so had to go to hospital...brought on by stress" (Delayed switch)

People who said that they switched regularly, both for energy and other services were additionally frustrated by their experience. Generally they had not had experienced switching problems before, so did not anticipate them on this occasion. In some cases, this led them to reappraise their propensity to switch energy suppliers in the future.

The emotional impact of an **erroneous switch** can be quite extensive. This situation is uniquely stressful as customers had not asked to switch and were put into a very difficult situation through no actions of their own. Customers were annoyed that this could happen, frustrated at how difficult it was to understand and resolve the problem, and some were stressed and distressed.

"I suffer from mental health as well so I was getting agitated from having to ring them" (Erroneous switch)

In addition, for PPM customers an erroneous switch might lead them to believe that they will be unable to top up and thus not have a supply at least while the issue is resolved.

"It's been a worry of not knowing when I'll have the supply, and a hassle having to phone them and ask the progress of it all" (Erroneous switch)

Some customers also felt that suppliers blamed the customer for the problem, when the customer felt the problem was completely out of their hands.

"I feel like they are putting the blame on me" (Erroneous switch)

This journey is potentially the most emotional one for customers who feel they are victims of an error which it feels hard to get suppliers to take ownership of. They, therefore, feel somewhat isolated and disempowered and are potentially more likely to make an official complaint.

"If it takes much longer then I'll go to the Energy Ombudsman over it"

Ultimately the research would suggest that an erroneous switch can put customers in a difficult, frustrating and stressful position it, while other problems with switching are less emotionally impactful.

Relative to this, most customers having a failed or delayed switch described problems as an inconvenience rather than as a major issue, leading to lower emotional impact.

4.1.4 Impact on attitudes to the market

Customers often spontaneously discussed the effect that their experience had on both their attitude to the energy market, suppliers' conduct and their propensity to switch in the future. We also prompted them on these questions, in particular the effect on their attitude towards switching.

We specifically asked whether customers who experienced an **erroneous switch** had spoken to other people about this – friends, family, colleagues etc. One customer had spoke to a few friends about it, but the others had not shared the experience with friends or family.

Those whose switches had failed frequently spoke to relatives and friends about their negative experience whereas it was unclear whether those who experience delays spoke to others about the events.

“I think at the time I spoke to quite a lot of people about it, I definitely spoke to my colleagues about my frustrations... so anyone that would come my way and was thinking of switching to my provider, I would tell them how I feel about that.” (Failed switch)

Most people's views of the market overall were negatively impacted by their switching problem. They did not feel that the market was as efficient or even as fair as before they experienced the issue. Interestingly customers did report speaking to others about their experience – which in turn influenced these people's opinions.

These experiences made customers view the suppliers they dealt with more dimly than before. This was often because of the perceived lack of proactivity in identifying, responding to and resolving problems. There was also a sense in the research that if a customer had a specific negative supplier perception or experience they tended to apply this sentiment to the majority suppliers in the market, or at the very least now expected they could have a similar experience with any given supplier.

Finally their likelihood to engage and switch again was generally reduced. Whilst not a major disruption in most people's lives, some felt the practical, financial and emotional impact on their lives, was bad enough to cancel out any potentially modest gains they felt they might make by switching.

“I would try and avoid switching again if possible. Even if it's a better deal than we get elsewhere, I'd still probably try and avoid switching as it seems quite a hassle...more hassle than it's worth” (Delayed switch one fuel first)

A minority of more ardent switchers across a number of different services would need to experience a more significant setback to cause them to stop switching, although they would be more cautious in the future and would weigh up the potential gains perhaps more critically.

“I would still switch if it was worth it, but if you're talking about saving ten quid a year then I wouldn't switch” (Delayed switch one fuel first)

Experiencing an **erroneous switch** could lead both to people not wanting to enter the market in the future for fear of encountering the degree of inconvenience they had experienced or indeed being much more aware of the market and what energy companies are offering. However the effect was mostly negative – customers who experience this issue are potentially NOT regular switchers and so

this experience is unlikely to have convinced them of the effectiveness of the energy switching market.

*“That experience has put me off going through all of that rigmarole, I’ve never seriously considered doing it since, it has had a negative effect”
(Erroneous switch)*

4.2 Preventing future switching problems

As discussed previously, customers identified a number of failings in the way their supplier(s) handled their problem, and where there was potential for service improvement. Additionally we asked consumers to consider ways to prevent problems surfacing in the first place, and some consumers offered their own solutions.

4.2.1 Safeguard to prevent erroneous switches

In the case of the **erroneous switch**, this was a journey that customers did not understand – even after resolving the problem they still felt that they didn’t really know how it had happened and thus were at a loss to make practical recommendations about what suppliers/the industry should do.

Customers said that the main thing that should change was that they should be told before the transfer that it is happening and thus given the opportunity to refuse/challenge. Customers felt that a fair switching system should have a highly visible safeguard built in which allows customers to confirm that they have indeed initiated a switch.

*“Notify me before any changes were done. Confirm it was me that was transferring instead of accepting the transfer, ring me when something gets done to your account at the address you live at, to check it was you”
(Erroneous switch)*

“Sent me a quotation that I could have read in the post...if you want to go ahead then let us know” (Erroneous switch)

Clearly, however, customers felt the best solution would be to introduce systems and processes that make erroneous switches much less likely in the first place.

Other suggestions as to how to mitigate the situation once the switch had happened, included being able to speak to someone at the energy company in person, as they felt issues may be resolved more easily and effectively this way. Some customers were frustrated at having to repeat their “story” multiple times and failing to make progress through the normal channels of communication. One point of contact would not necessarily improve problem resolution, but it might lessen time or emotional impact.

Customers who have experienced an erroneous switch would be happy with companies sharing customer data to ensure that this problem is less likely to happen to others (or indeed them).

4.2.2 Asking for more customer information up front

In the research we also asked customers who had experienced all types of switching problems whether they would be prepared to find and share more information when initiating the switch (e.g. a meter code) rather than just name, address, consumption etc. as at present.

All customers we interviewed felt that the possible additional time/effort spent in providing additional information at the start of the process was certainly worth the effort, if it meant that problems were less likely to occur. The underlying assumption was that the additional information would be easily available and that the process of sharing would not be too onerous (e.g. an extra data field when filling in information on a PCW or emailing an easily found code to a new supplier).

*“What’s 5 mins, what’s 10 mins? If it speeds up the process, then fine”
(Delayed switch)*

It is also worth pointing out that the customers we interviewed had experienced a fair degree of inconvenience and thus they were likely to agree that additional effort at the start was worth it for the correct end result.

4.2.3. Data sharing between suppliers

Customers were also asked to what extent they would be comfortable with technical data about their energy account, meter etc. being shared between energy companies in order to improve data transmission processes and thus militate against the sorts of negative switching experiences that they had experienced.

The majority saw this as a good idea. If data could be shared via an industry database containing key information, it would enable more accurate transmission of data when switching. If it was likely to militate against problems due to errors, which they had experienced, then it was a positive thing. Some did raise issues of data privacy but felt that if this was an industry database and not owned by a commercial organisation to use for sales/prospecting, then it could be entrusted with data.

“They do that with insurance companies, don’t they – why not?” (Delayed switch)

“I’m surprised something like that doesn’t already exist” (Failed switch)

A few did have latent concerns over privacy, however and would need reassurance that the database was secure and only to be used for to support an accurate transfer of data /accurate access to data when switching.

“I am a little worried about that, to be honest. Just because of things that have gone on in the past in terms of information sharing and customer details being shared without knowing how it is used” (Failed switch)

Surprisingly, no customers cited their recent problems as evidence for NOT sharing data. During the interviews the competence and trustworthiness of some of the suppliers they were dealing with was often questioned. However, they still accepted that that an industry-wide database could be trusted.

5. Conclusions

Unreliable energy switches have different impacts on customers (time, financial, emotional) and different levels of impact, often depending on the nature of the problem they encountered.

Customers whose switches **failed**, have to spend a lot of time chasing suppliers and are financially impacted through the loss of potential savings they expected from the switch. This (and the inconvenience) combines to cause frustration.

Customers experiencing **delayed** switches, are less impacted as they do manage to switch eventually, but they will experience inconvenience and stress in the meantime. In a minority of cases there will be a small financial loss caused by the delay and the emotional impact is lessened when suppliers refund this.

Those people experiencing a **delay on one of two fuels switched** again are inconvenienced rather than significantly emotionally impacted, but they might still be left with a negative view of switching.

Customers who have been **transferred erroneously** will experience the greatest emotional impact (surprise, even shock that this can happen) and also potentially have to spend more time driving a resolution themselves, which will exacerbate the emotional impact of this scenario.

Broadly speaking these impacts are rarely significant enough that they cause major problems in consumers' lives (unless those customers are in vulnerable situations where the impact can be more disruptive and emotionally significant) but they do impact on customers' future interest in switching.

Generally this impact is negative i.e. they are less warm to switching energy suppliers in the future because of their experience and this should be a cause for industry concern and a stimulant for change to make switching more reliable in the future.

Annex

Screener

**Q1 Are you responsible or jointly responsible for the gas and/or electricity bills in your household?
If you rent and your landlord manages your energy supply, please code "No".**

CODE ONE

1. Yes
2. No - **CLOSE**
3. Refused - **CLOSE**
4. Don't know - **CLOSE**

Q2 Over the past 12 months, has any of the following happened to your energy supply:

CODE ALL THAT APPLY

1. I tried to switch my gas and/or electricity supplier but my gas/electricity/both fuels didn't switch over
2. My gas and/or electricity supplier changed without my consent or knowledge
3. I switched to a different gas and/or electricity supplier
4. None of these - **CLOSE**

ASK ALL WHO CODE 3 AT Q2

Q3 Did you experience any of the following problems with your with your switch?

CODE ALL THAT APPLY

1. The switch took longer than my supplier said it would
2. I switched both gas and electricity, but one fuel switched before the other
3. The switch went through, but afterwards my new supplier said my electricity/gas meter was the wrong type for the tariff I switched to
4. The switch went through but afterwards there was a mistake in the bills I received from my new/old supplier
5. I had a different/another problem with my switch (please specify)
6. There were no problems with my switch

ASK IF Q3=1

Q4 Now we'd like to understand in more detail the reasons for your switching problems

Why did the switch take longer than your supplier said it would?

CODE ALL THAT APPLY - RANDOMISE

1. The new supplier or price comparison website took longer than expected verifying your metering details (meter type or meter setting for Economy 7 / Economy 10 electricity meters)
2. The new supplier or price comparison website took longer than expected verifying your address details
3. The new supplier or price comparison website contacted you to find out more information about your address details or metering details
4. Initially, another customer was incorrectly switched by the supplier, instead of you
5. You were in debt with your old supplier, so the new supplier said they couldn't take you as a new customer
6. You accidentally gave the wrong address details when switching
7. Other reason (Please specify)
8. Don't know

ASK IF Q2=1

Q5 Why was your attempted switch to a new supplier unsuccessful?

CODE ALL THAT APPLY - RANDOMISE

1. You could not find your address on a price comparison website or a supplier's website and so you gave up trying to switch
2. The new supplier or price comparison website could not verify your address details and said they could not switch your supply
3. Initially, another customer was incorrectly switched by the supplier, instead of you
4. You were in debt with your old supplier, so the new supplier said they couldn't take you as a new customer
5. You accidentally gave the wrong address details when switching
6. You started to switch, but gave up and so never actually switched
7. There was some IT problem when you tried to switch (e.g. the price comparison website crashed)
8. I tried to switch both gas and electricity, but only one switch went through
9. Other reason (Please Specify)
10. Don't know

ASK Q6 ONWARDS IF:

Q2=2 (Erroneous switch)

Q3=1 AND 2 (Delayed switch AND Gas switched before elec/other way round)

Q3=3 (Successful switch but subsequent metering problems)

Q3=4 (Billing problems following switch)

Q4 =1,2,3,4 (Delayed switch for in scope reasons)

Q5= 1,2,3,8 (Failed switch for in scope reasons)

Q3=5; Q4=7; Q5=8 (Other reasons)

Q6 Populus is currently working on behalf of Ofgem , Great Britain's gas and electricity regulator to understand more about the problems that energy customers face when attempting to switch supplier and we would be interested to speak with you about your experience.

The interview will take approximately 45 minutes and would be conducted over the telephone. You would receive a cheque for £40 as a thank you for taking part.

Are you willing to be re-contacted by Populus to conduct this interview on behalf of Ofgem?

CODE ONE

1. Yes (enter telephone number): **NUMERIC ENTRY**
2. No

ASK THOSE WHO CODE 1 (AGREE) AT Q6

Q7 Thinking back to the problem(s) you experienced when switching energy supplier, how long ago was this?

CODE ONE

1. In the last 4 weeks
2. Between 1-3 months ago
3. Between 3-6 months ago
4. Between 6-12 months ago
5. Over a year ago

ASK THOSE WHO CODE 1 (AGREE) AT Q6

Q8. How do you usually pay for your energy?

CODE ONE

1. Direct Debit
2. Cash or cheque when you receive a bill
3. Online or from online banking when you receive a bill
4. Over the phone when you receive a bill
5. Pre-payment meter / top-up meter key in a shop
6. Other (Do not specify)
7. Don't know

ASK THOSE WHO CODE 1 (AGREE) AT Q6

Q9. Which of the following best describes the energy tariff you are currently on?

CODE ONE

1. **A Fixed term tariff** – your unit rates are fixed until a certain date (for example 12 or 18 months)
2. **Standard / Variable tariff** – your unit rates can change when energy prices go up or down
3. **A multi-rate tariff** – you pay a different amount for energy depending on the time of day
4. Other
5. Don't know

ASK THOSE WHO CODE 1 (AGREE) AT Q6

Q10 Which of the following best describes how many times you have switched your energy supplier?

CODE ONE

1. This was my first time switching
2. I've switched twice
3. I've switched 3 times
4. I've switched 4-5 times
5. I've switched over 5 times

Sample scoping breakdown

Switching problem experienced	In scope reasoning	Number interviewed
Failed switch (the switch did not go through)	<p>All respondents had to select that</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They tried to switch their gas and/or electricity supplier but the switch didn't happen <p>Before selecting ONE or ANY of the reasons below</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You could not find your address on a price comparison website or a supplier's website and so you gave up trying to switch 2. The new supplier or price comparison website could not verify your address details and said they could not switch your supply 3. Initially, another customer was incorrectly switched by the supplier, instead of you 	5
Delayed switch (either single fuel switched and delayed or dual fuel switched and both delayed)	<p>All respondents had to select that</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The switch took longer than their supplier said it would <p>Before selecting ONE or ANY of the reasons below</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The new supplier or price comparison website took longer than expected verifying your metering details (meter type or meter setting for Economy 7 / Economy 10 electricity meters) 2. The new supplier or price comparison website took longer than expected verifying your address details 3. The new supplier or price comparison website contacted you to find out more information about your address details or metering details 4. Initially, another customer was incorrectly switched by the supplier, instead of you 	5

<p>Delayed switch (one of dual fuels switched was delayed, the other was switched successfully)</p>	<p>All respondents had to select that</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The switch took longer than my supplier said it would • They switched both gas and electricity, but one fuel switched before the other <p>Before selecting ONE or ANY of the reasons below</p>	<p>3</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The new supplier or price comparison website took longer than expected verifying your metering details (meter type or meter setting for Economy 7 / Economy 10 electricity meters) 2. The new supplier or price comparison website took longer than expected verifying your address details 3. The new supplier or price comparison website contacted you to find out more information about your address details or metering details 4. Initially, another customer was incorrectly switched by the supplier, instead of you 		
<p>Erroneous switch (i.e. the customer's account was switched without their knowledge or consent)</p>	<p>All respondents had to select that</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Their gas and/or electricity supplier changed without my consent or knowledge 	<p>3</p>

Topic Guides

Problematic Switching Guide

Introduction

Thanks for taking part in this research

Explain market research process

Confidentiality and recording

Let's start with a short introduction, please tell me a little bit about yourself, family, job, hobbies etc.

Recalling the context

As you know we would like to talk about your experience when you last switched/tried to switch your energy supplier;

Do you remember what else was going on in your life when you switched/tried to switch your supplier? (holidays, work, family life)

Can you tell me when this happened, what time of year, how long ago etc.

[For delayed switches specifically], how long did the overall experience last?

What was it that made you decide to switch energy suppliers at that particular time

Brief background to the switch

Was it electricity, gas or both fuels that you switched/tried to switch?

[For those that switched/tried to switch both fuels], did you switch/try to switch to a dual fuel tariff?

Who were you with (which supplier(s) - for each) before you switched/tried to switch your supplier?

Who did you switch/try to switch to (which supplier) and (briefly) why

The Switching Journey

Overview of journey

How did you go about switching – can you just take me through the process from start to finish

Did you go direct to new suppliers (call them) or use a price comparison website and why that route

Having selected a supplier and initiated the switching process

- What happened then
- What did the new supplier/PCW tell you would happen, what did they promise
- What did you have to do

Expectations

What were your expectations at that point (i.e. when you had decided who to go with and started the “switch”)

How did you feel at this stage (i.e. having selected a new supplier and initiated the switch)

- What did you expect to happen, what were the stages you expected
- How long did you expect the process to take (N.B. the actual switch not the whole process)
- What did the new supplier tell you would happen (e.g. about how the process would work, about timescales, about billing)
- Did you feel that you knew everything you needed to at that point

Did you have any concerns that the switch might not happen/happen as quickly as you had been previously told? What were these? Where did you hear about these?

What happened – what went wrong (and what went right)

So could you tell me now what actually happened, particularly focusing in what went wrong or didn't happen according to your expectations

Moderator will probe to ensure that the respondents tells the story of their switch and what went wrong, from their perspective before picking up on specific details; they will also tailor the probing depending on the specific issue experienced

- What information did you provide to start the switch and how did they provide it? (e.g. this might have been at the start of the process on PCW) (if respondent can't recall, prompt with e.g. just their name, email address, postcode or full address?)
- Was there anything you had to look up like a meter identifier number? Did you need to tell the supplier anything about what type of meter you had?
- What communication did you receive from your new supplier
 - On next steps
 - Requests for further information
 - Confirmation of timelines
 - Confirmation of the details of the switch (e.g. key customer details and key details of current supplier, new tariff details)
 - Did the new supplier ask you to notify them if anything looked incorrect in these details
- And did you receive anything from your old supplier, what and when (e.g. “sorry to see you go” letter/email; did they try and keep your business, how; could have been a reminder or request to provide a meter reading or communication about the switch date)
- At what point did you feel things didn't go to plan
- What specifically went wrong
- And what do you think started that or caused that
- What did the supplier tell you at this point about what was happening and why things were not proceeding as your expected (and which supplier was this)

- What did the supplier do to try and solve the problems
- Did you have to do anything to help sort the issues – did you initiate that or did the supplier ask you to do something
- Did the switch take place, if not why not? [For customers who had a problem post-switch due to their meter type], what happened after the switch went through?
 - Did they get any communication about why not (e.g. contract amendment, meter replacement, switch reversal, bills based on wrong meter type)
 - What did the supplier tell you at this point about what was happening and why things were not proceeding as your expected (and which supplier was this)
 - What did the supplier do to try and solve the problems
 - Did you have to do anything to help sort the issues – did you initiate that or did the supplier ask you to do something
- [For customers who have had a failed switch in one or more fuels], did you eventually switch to the same supplier and deal you initially tried to switch to? If yes, how long did it take for you before you successfully switched over?
If no, did you stay with your existing supplier or switch to a completely different supplier?
- Did the supplier offer anything
 - By way of a goodwill gesture, what? Do you feel it was sufficient to make up for the problem you experienced? (If not), what would have been sufficient for you?
- How did you feel about all of this?
- Thinking back about the whole switching process, what do you feel went well?, Which aspects went according to plan/to what you expected

Effect of problems (ensure time taken to probe fully)

What effect did the problems you were having with switching have on you more generally

- How big an issue was it – e.g. compared with other problems with services/purchases – what was it like (from things like wrong product being delivered through appliance breaking down in warranty to bank error etc.)
- How did it affect other aspects of your life (e.g. finances/budgeting)
- How much time did it take to sort out
- Did it affect other people in the family too or was it just you sorting this out
- What did you do/have to do as a result (e.g. chase supplier, supply additional information, move money around bank accounts to cover bills etc.)
- How were you feeling at this time – how would you describe the emotional impact of this - was it just a hassle or a big worry – why is that

Result on attitudes

Looking back how has this whole experience made you feel

- About the switching process in general why
- About your new supplier (or potential new supplier for failed switches), why

- About your old supplier, why
- About switching energy suppliers in the future, why
- About the energy market more generally

Was your switching experience something that you talked to others about (who, when)? Or was this just something that happened as you got on with your daily life (thinking back to what you said you were doing when this happened)?

The future

Let's think about what could happen to make sure the switching process is better from your point of view

- First of all, looking back on your experience, what is the single most important thing that you would have liked to have happened differently and why
- If you think back to your switching experience, would you rather have certainty that the switch is going to happen / happen when you're told its going to happen, or is just being kept updated as to progress with the switch enough?
- [For those with one fuel delayed or failed specifically], would the experience have been better for you if both fuels failed / were equally delayed?

In order to improve the process it might be necessary to make some industry wide changes to the way that switching happens

- e.g. ask the customer for a little more information up front – how do you feel about having to look for specific information e.g. codes, on your bills and providing those
- e.g. there could be an industry database of information about customers' gas and electricity meters so that accurate information can be shared between companies when you want to switch – how do you feel about that

Summary

Thank you for your time – is there anything else that you feel energy companies should do in the future in order to make sure switching problems like the one you experienced don't happen

Switching without consent guide

Introduction

Thanks for taking part in this research

Explain market research process

Confidentiality and recording

Let's start with a short introduction, please tell me a little bit about yourself, family, job, hobbies etc.

Recalling the context

As you know we would like to talk about your experience when your energy supplier switched without your consent

Do you remember what else was going on in your life at that time? (holidays, work, family life)

Can you tell me when this happened? – what time of year, how long ago etc.

Brief background to the switch

Was it electricity, gas or both fuels that were switched?

Who were you with (for each) before your supplier changed?

Who did your energy supply change to?

The switching journey

What happened – what went wrong

So let's talk about what happened in a bit more detail...

How did you first find out that your energy supplier had been switched / was in the process of being switched?

- Did you receive any communication from your new supplier? When did you receive this?
- If so, what? Prompt if necessary
e.g. A welcome pack from the new supplier
Terms and conditions of your new tariff
Confirmation of customer details
- And did you receive anything from your old supplier, if so what and when (for example "a sorry to see you go" letter...)
- Can you recall your immediate reaction to finding out about this? How did you feel at this stage?
- Have you any idea why your supply was changed or was in the process of being changed without your consent or prior knowledge? How do you know this? Did you contact anyone?
 - Probe for understanding of data errors – what do you think might have gone wrong and who was responsible (e.g. customer vs supplier system)
- Did your own supplier or the supplier who was trying to switch you over to them tell you anything at this point, about what was happening and why? Which supplier? What did they say?
- Did you have to do anything to try to solve the issue? Was this something you initiated? or did the your own supplier or new supplier ask you to do anything?

- Did your existing supplier try and solve the problem? What did it do? Did it make a difference?
- And did the new supplier do anything to help? What did it do? Did it make a difference
- And did either of the suppliers offer anything in terms of explanation, what
- How far did the transfer of your energy supply go before it was reversed/stopped?
 - Did you get a bill from the new supplier? If so, what did you do?
 - (Pre-Payment Meter Customers – did you get a new key card, if so what did you do)
 - Did you receive a closing bill from your existing supplier? If so, what did you do?
 - If billed, were your bills corrected to appear as if you had never been switched?
 -
- Did they offer anything by way of a goodwill gesture? What was this? Do you feel it was sufficient to make up for the problem you experienced? (If not), what would have been sufficient for you? (If not given a goodwill gesture, was what you received acceptable and appropriate? Would you have preferred something else?
 -
 - [For direct debit customers]. Were you charged for a final bill by your existing supplier? [For prepayment customers], did you prepay your new supplier? (If , billed) Were you refunded? If not, have you done anything to get your money back?
- How did you feel about all of this

What's happening now

Has the problem now been sorted or is it still ongoing?

Did you receive anything to tell you how long this should take to sort out

Was it resolved when they said it would be?

(If finished) are you satisfied with the way it was resolved?

(if not finished) What still needs to be done? Do you know when it'll be resolved? Are you confident it will be resolved? Why?

— Thinking about the way your old and new energy suppliers have dealt with this issue so far, can you tell me what's gone well and why?

How well do you think the issue was handled?

Looking back on your experience, what is the single most important thing that you would have liked to have happened differently and why? What could have gone better?

—

— In your opinion, how do you think the energy suppliers should have responded? [Prompts: If you had contact with the supplier / received any communication from them before the switch completed, how could the communication have been different to alert you to the mistake? E.g. different content as well as method of communication. Do you think the existing and/or new supplier kept you updated As to what was happening? Do you think they could have done

anything differently? Given what you know about the problem, do you think it was resolved/will be resolved in a timeframe you're happy with?

Effect of problems

What effect did this process have on you more generally

- How big an issue was it
- How did it affect other aspects of your life (e.g. finances/budgeting)
- What did you do/have to do as a result (e.g. chase supplier, supply additional information, move money around bank accounts to cover bills etc., request information, bills or statement that you missed from your current supplier)
- How were you feeling at this time – how would you describe the emotional impact of this - was it just a hassle or a big worry – why is that

Result on attitudes

Looking back how has this whole experience made you feel

- About the switching process in general why
- About the supplier who you were switched to, why
- About your existing supplier, why
- About switching energy suppliers in the future, why
- About the energy market more generally

Was your switching experience something that you talked to others about (who, when)? Or was this just something that happened as you got on with your daily life (thinking back to what you said you were doing when this happened)?

Summary

Thank you for your time – is there anything else that you feel energy companies should do in the future in order to make sure switching problems like the one you experienced don't happen