

Consumer engagement on loss of smart functionality

Background

Prompted by data from Citizens' Advice, the Consumer Reference Group (CRG) examined energy suppliers' existing approaches to communicating to consumers with SMETS 1 meters that they might lose smart functionality following a change of supplier.

BEIS used the information received to identify good practice, and to develop a common framework that could be used as part of business-as-usual activities to engage with and manage consumer expectations on this issue.

Purpose

This framework establishes principles and core content to help make communication to consumers in respect of losing smart functionality in the event of a change of supplier clearer and more consistent. It is designed to be relevant to consumer engagement both prior to having their smart meter installed and prior to switching to a new supplier, across all communications channels.

The Principles

To maximise effectiveness, it is recommended that suppliers and consumer groups apply the principles below:

- 1) Messages need to provide tangible, practical advice to the consumer.
- 2) Messages should be simple and framed in easy to understand language (e.g. through provision of 'easy read'¹ information).
- 3) Messages need to be provided across channels and formats that are appropriate and accessible to customers, and tailored for groups with specific needs as appropriate.
- 4) Information on potential loss of functionality is provided at multiple touchpoints during the consumer journey, to help consumer recall and understanding.

Core Messages

CRG members considered the minimum information that needs to be conveyed to consumers at a suitable point prior to the installation of the smart meter and/or in the event of a change of supplier. The following core messages emerged:

- explain what could happen in simple terms: it is possible that their smart meter will start working like their old meter did, and if so consumers will need to submit meter reads/have a meter reader visit to take readings. Supply will not be affected – the meter will just record energy consumption like the previous meter did – it just won't send the information to their energy supplier remotely;
- explain to consumers that their IHD should continue to work and display accurate consumption, but that the cost information will not reflect their new tariff;

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication/accessible-communication-formats>

- explain that this issue will be resolved. A project to make the meters compatible between suppliers is underway;
- advise consumers that if they switch, it is worth asking their new supplier whether the smart service can in fact be maintained;
- where a consumer has a smart prepayment meter, advise that the existing meter may need to be replaced and provide appropriate communications, in accordance with the above principles, around the loss of credit from the smart prepayment meter and the ensuing account settlement.

Commitment

CRG members would like to recommend that energy suppliers, consumer groups and others use this framework, which establishes a minimum baseline while allowing organisations to tailor the messages to suit their house style.

It is recommended that energy suppliers in particular embed the framework across their communication channels/consumer touchpoints² as soon as practicable but no later than August 2017 (though it is recognised that for some printed materials, the refresh cycle might be much longer).

Next Steps

CRG will review the framework within a year of its adoption to assess the effectiveness of messaging to consumers.

BEIS will engage with Citizens Advice and Ofgem to monitor uptake of the framework and the trend in consumer complaints, and develop appropriate next steps.

² Communication channels/consumer touchpoints may include: call centre scripts; printed literature; website and information provided by installers when booking installation.