

Supporting residential energy customers through the coronavirus pandemic – summary of discussion at stakeholder workshop (7 July 2020)

On 7 July 2020, we held a stakeholder workshop on our proposals to support residential customers in our draft decision 'Supporting energy customers through the coronavirus pandemic'. At the workshop, we received feedback from energy retailers, industry bodies and community organisations which is summarised below by key themes. The slides presented at the workshop and a recording of the session are also available on our website.

Supporting utility relief grant applications

Current retailer experiences

- A water retailer shared their experiences of managing utility relief grant applications, which they take a case management approach to. They have made some system changes to work with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) portal (which took three weeks to implement) and received training from the Utility Relief Grant Scheme (URGS) team at DHHS on how to fill out the forms. As a result of their changes around 80-85 per cent of applications are approved and cancellation rates have decreased from 50 per cent to 10 per cent. These changes have not really impacted call handling times.
- An energy retailer that already works with customers to complete applications over the phone noted that it has been positively received by customers, and application success rates have increased from around 30% to 100%. However the retailer noted that average call handling times have increased to around 18 minutes which has had an impact on the organisation, and it is unclear how sustainable their current process may be if application numbers increase significantly.

Operational challenges

- One retailer noted that approval times can be longer than three months. The water retailer noted it had also seen long wait times earlier in the year, but these had improved in recent weeks. DHHS said there had been a backlog in applications, but this has now been cleared and applications are being turned around within 28 days.

- Two retailers noted issues with applications older than 90 days being cancelled without any notification or follow-up. DHHS advised they had provided notice of cancellations to all retailers ahead of time and contacted customers via a range of methods.
- One retailer noted issues it had experienced with the DHHS portal freezing when completing application forms, and not being able to access sufficient portal keys. It raised concerns that if there is an increase in application numbers, the system may not be able to manage. DHHS advised that any system issues could be reported to urgsreview@dhhs.vic.gov.au but it had not had any feedback about issues to date.
- One community organisation raised potential challenges around customers requiring translation services and suggested that a requirement to use an interpreter could be included in the guideline to ensure consistent practices across retailers. The water retailer noted that they translate information about URGs into other languages and also use an interpreter. A financial counsellor noted challenges around SMS messages sent from DHHS to non-English speaking clients relating to the URGs backlog.

Other points raised

- One retailer noted they refer customers requesting URGS to financial counsellors as there is a requirement to refer customers who would benefit from a more holistic discussion about their financial situation.
- A community organisation considered that retailers should be required to follow-up on URGS applications with customers, for example when supporting documentation is required, and that this should be explicit in the draft guideline. They highlighted the benefits of the proposed guideline in freeing up resources for financial counsellors and removing an additional step in the application process.
- One retailer questioned whether they would have a say in the information required by the application form, as the application form is long and includes data they would not typically capture from customers. DHHS noted that this information is required to assess applications, but stakeholders are welcome to provide feedback to the URGS review team.
- One retailer questioned whether the administration fee they receive for processing applications would be increased.
- Two retailers suggested potential changes to the wider URGS application process (uploading application forms offline, and DHHS completing application forms with customers).

Offering tariff checks to customers receiving tailored assistance

- One consumer organisation strongly supported our proposal to extend tariff check requirements to all customers receiving tailored assistance but considered this should be a permanent rather than temporary change. They also noted it would be helpful to see additional support for customers on gas standing offers, and more active support to help customers manage their energy usage (such as advising customers of which appliances are using a lot of energy).

- One consumer organisation questioned whether tariff checks could be linked to the energy efficiency of homes. Another suggested the commission should consider publishing more information on customers in low energy efficiency homes.
- One retailer suggested that tariff checks are less urgent for customers who can pay the ongoing cost of their energy.
- A few retailers noted that customers already receive the best offer message on their bill. One retailer suggested that adding additional requirements to the conversations retailers have with their customers could lead to customers being overloaded with information. One consumer organisation noted that customers can miss the best offer message on their bills. They considered that providing the message via multiple channels would be appropriate for customers who are struggling to pay for their energy.
- One retailer questioned whether customers would need to be offered tariff checks if they were already on the best offer. They also questioned whether the threshold for this requirement taking effect would be the same as the existing code requirements (when a customer has not paid a bill by its pay-by date and has arrears of more than \$55 including GST) or aligned with the temporary reporting requirements during the pandemic.