

About this consultation

Ofgem launched this statutory consultation on consumer standards as a follow up to their earlier proposals in May. The regulator is gathering stakeholder views on renewed plans to embed improved standards into supplier licence conditions and the associated guidance documents. This consultation covers a range of supplier customer service issues, including proposals to address barriers to contacting customer service teams and enhancing supplier obligations regarding proactive identification and support for customers struggling with their energy bills.

Key points and recommendations

Age UK welcomes Ofgem's attempts to improve customer service standards and formalise its proposals by bringing them into supplier licence conditions.

We commend the regulator's efforts to make these changes in time for winter 2023/24 but we recommend a more ambitious November implementation date.

Key components of Ofgem's guidance documents should be brought into licence conditions to improve compliance and facilitate decisive enforcement of the rules.

These plans risk being undermined by a lack of appetite for proactive oversight and enforcement alongside Ofgem's heavy reliance on principles-based regulation.

We support Ofgem's commitment to further investigate the needs of digitally excluded customers – we invite Ofgem to work directly with us on this topic.

However, we are concerned that suppliers will not be required to offer a freephone telephone number for those customers who remain offline.

We would welcome the opportunity for further consultation on Ofgem's longer-term plans for a wider consumer standards framework.

About Age UK

Age UK is a national charity that works with a network of partners, including Age Scotland, Age Cymru, Age NI and local Age UKs across England, to help everyone make the most of later life, whatever their circumstances. In the UK, the Charity helps more than seven million older people each year by providing advice and support. It also researches and campaigns on the issues that matter most to older people. Its work focuses on ensuring that older people: have enough money; enjoy life and feel well; receive high quality health and care; are comfortable, safe and secure at home; and feel valued and able to participate.

Response

Ofgem has committed to include a range of welcome measures to improve ease of contact with suppliers. These proposals include being available via various contact methods which reflect consumer needs, opening times which better account for customer requirements, free contact centre access for consumers in vulnerable circumstances, and priority access for vulnerable customers or their advocates when they are in immediate need of assistance. Suppliers will also be subject to guidance requiring them to justify call wait times of over 5 minutes. Age UK supports these proposals and welcomes Ofgem bringing them into licence conditions and supplier guidance.

¹ Ofgem, 2023. Consumer Standards - Statutory Consultation. Ofgem./ [Online]. Available at: https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/publications/consumer-standards-statutory-consultation?utm_medium=email&utm_source=dotMailer&utm_campaign=Daily-Alert_26-07-2023&utm_content=Consumer+Standards+--+Statutory+Consultation&dm_i=1QCB,8CZRW,8DTLF,YGDI0,1. [Accessed 27/07/23]. Pg8.

[2023&utm_content=Consumer+Standards+-+Statutory+Consultation&dm_i=1QCB.8CZRW.8DTLF.YGDI0.1.](https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/publications/consumer-standards-statutory-consultation?0.0000052?0.0000056t608t)
[Accessed 27/07/23]. Pg81.

¹⁵ Ofgem, 2023. Consumer Standards - Statutory Consultation. Ofgem./ [Online]. Available at:
<https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/publications/consumer-standards-statutory-consultation?0.0000052?0.0000056t608t> at: