

Joint statement on digital exclusion in the energy retail market

Millions of people will struggle to pay their bills this winter, so it's vital that energy suppliers are there to help. Lots of companies are prioritising online customer service channels to meet increased demand. But offline services like telephone helplines are getting worse. This means people who don't have access to the internet or lack digital skills are stuck at the end of the phone, unable to get the support they need. More often than not, the people left out are the ones already bearing the brunt of the cost-of-living crisis.

The signatories to this joint statement support the recommendations made in the new *Access Denied* report by Citizens Advice. People who need to contact their suppliers this winter cannot wait for long-term change. There are specific and immediate improvements we need to see across and beyond the energy retail sector.

What needs to happen now

- Ofgem, the energy regulator, should use their Market Compliance Reviews to ensure energy suppliers have telephone services which are high quality and accessible for all consumers without additional charges. Telephone support services must be properly resourced and available over the coming winter.
- Energy suppliers should make sure their digital and telephone services are presented clearly and are accessible for everyone. One of the ways they can do this is through seeking feedback from people using their services.
- Third-party intermediaries like switching websites should ensure they are designed around the needs of digitally disadvantaged people. This includes providing offline routes to access services.

Medium to longer term reforms

- Ofgem should ensure higher service standards in future by introducing a new Consumer Duty to drive positive outcomes for all consumers, including the digitally disadvantaged. We would like to see the preparatory work for this duty begin as soon as possible.

The digital spaces that so many of us take for granted are not within everyone's reach. And for those who struggle to connect with the online world, getting support with energy can be particularly challenging.

Energy is an essential service, and the cost-of-living crisis means this winter will be extremely hard for many people. It's vital that we all play our part, so our organisations will work to ensure that the people who depend on us can access support in the best way for them. We will be working to make sure that people who are digitally disadvantaged are not forgotten, and call upon Ofgem, as well as energy suppliers and the government, to do the same.