

Telstra Energy electricity and gas retail licence applications – roundtable with Victorian seniors

On 29 June 2021, the Commissioner for Seniors Victoria and associated stakeholders¹ discussed Telstra Energy's applications for electricity and gas retail licences with staff at the Essential Services Commission. The key issues raised by stakeholders included:

- Telstra has been known to have poor communication and customer service in the telecommunications sector. There is often the need for repeat calls to resolve complaints and long wait times to speak with someone which can cause stress for older consumers. There was concern that these issues would also be experienced by energy customers of Telstra Energy.
- Telstra's hardship policy for telecommunications is not well written and is not accessible to all consumers, especially older consumers who may not be as digitally literate as other consumers.
- A key area is to ensure that Telstra Energy has appropriate financial hardship provisions for people who cannot pay their energy bills and to make access to hardship programs easy for customers and their advocates. It was also noted that it is important for energy companies to check if a customer is eligible for concessions to help with their energy bills.
- There was a concern in relation to Telstra's Digital Inclusion Policy relating to telecommunication services as not all consumers own a smart phone or have access to the internet, so Telstra Energy needs to be accessible to all customers. An attendee stated that according to the Digital Inclusion Index, 69 per cent of senior consumers have challenges with technology. On the contrary, there is an opportunity to bridge the digital divide and implement ways to further include older consumers in digital trials.
- Many senior Victorians are existing Telstra telecommunication customers and have been for a very long time. There is a concern that many of these customers may sign up with Telstra Energy for their energy services even if Telstra Energy prices are not the most affordable in the market.

¹ Representatives from U3A Victoria, Dementia Victoria, Better Place, Country Women's Association Victoria, Council of the Ageing, Long Gully Neighbourhood House, and Fair Go for Pensioners.

- Consideration of requirements to improve communication and accessibility for older consumers included a dedicated phone line through licence conditions that would require Telstra Energy to develop this.
- Telstra has good procedures in place for telecommunications, however, in practice, they do not always work. An example was when a customer spoke to Telstra about a telecommunications account and was seeking for Telstra to change the account name from her deceased partner into her name. Telstra was not able to complete this process appropriately which the consumer found unacceptable. This is a matter Telstra Energy would need to address in the interests of consumers.
- Telstra Energy should provide better support for older consumers who may have dementia or who are experiencing financial abuse. A model to consider is the Banking Code, which includes provisions for participating banks to be inclusive and accessible for all people, including:
 - older customers
 - people with a disability
 - Indigenous Australians, including in remote locations, and
 - people with limited English.
- There were concerns that Telstra Energy would use Telstra’s existing database of telecommunication customers to market Telstra Energy plans. There was concern about the use of this data leading to poor marketing conduct similar to that which Telstra has experienced in the past when selling telecommunications plans to Indigenous customers.
- Paper bill fees could be an extra cost for older consumers who prefer taking bills to Australia Post to pay. Telstra Energy should consider offering in-person payment methods.
- There are potential positives resulting from Telstra Energy entering the energy market such as becoming a ‘one stop shop’ for utility services, which may help consumers in managing finances and increasing competition in the market.