

CEER 2013 Consumer Conference on Energy Customers

Break-out session A: Protection and empowerment Complaint handling: listening and responding to customers

Introduction

One of the principles that characterises the CEER-BEUC *2020 Vision for Europe's energy customers* is **protection and empowerment**. This principle aims to ensure access to energy supply and to guard against unfair commercial practices and unsatisfactory outcomes, recognising the diverse needs of customers, in particular the most vulnerable in society. It also relates to the possibility for consumers to participate in competitive energy markets: for customers to be engaged, to take choices and to exercise their rights as energy customers, based on trust in and knowledge of how the energy sector operates.

This break-out session focuses on energy consumer protection; in particular how complaints can be used to understand consumers' needs and wants and to improve energy markets.

CEER's work

Following a request from the European Commission, European energy regulators developed recommendations on customer complaint handling, reporting and classification in the energy sector in a 2010 report: *Guidelines of Good Practice (GGP) on Customer Complaint Handling, Reporting and Classification*. In 2011, on the basis of these GGP, we published a Status Review¹ analysing progress in the implementation of these recommendations.

The Panel

A complaint is defined as the expression of a customer's dissatisfaction. It is one of the most important indicators for monitoring markets and a social and economic reflection of the customer's point of view².

The objective of this panel is to better understand how consumers' complaints are handled by different stakeholders (ombudsmen or companies), what can we learn from these complaints and which value they are awarded from different viewpoints.

Break-out A is moderated by Ms Christina Veigl-Guthann, member of CEER's Consumer and Retail Markets Working Group, with the participation of:

- Ms Marta Baeza Fernández, E.ON Distribution Spain
- Mr Eric Houtman, Energy Ombudsman, Belgium
- Mr Bo Hesselgren, Swedish Consumer Energy Markets Bureau, Sweden
- Ms Carina Törnblom, Head of Unit Consumer Strategy, Representation and International Relations (DG SANCO)

¹ Status Review GGP on Complaint Handling as of 1 January 2011

² ERGEG 2010 GGP on Indicators for Retail Market Monitoring

CEER Guidelines of Good Practice (GPP) on Customer Complaint Handling, Reporting and Classification included the following recommendations:

1. Customer should be provided, on their bills, with the contact details of the service provider's customer service.
2. Customer should be provided by their service provider with the relevant contact information of the relevant third party body in case they want to complain. The most convenient channel for contacting this third party body should be proposed, among the following options: address, phone number, website, e-mail, face to face contact point.
3. To submit a complaint to a service provider, a wide range of channels should be available, and, as a minimum, post-mail and phone.
4. Statutory complaint handling standards common to electricity and gas service providers should be in place. Such standards should be determined at a national level, taking into account the maturity of the market and the national legislative and regulatory provisions on customer rights. National Regulatory Authorities (NRAs) are best placed to set up these standards, after consultation with stakeholders, as appropriate and to enforce them.
5. In each Member State, redress schemes should be in place to allow compensation in defined cases.
6. Service providers should follow the alternative dispute resolution (ADR) body recommendations even if they are not legally binding.
7. When a regulator deems it appropriate to receive data on complaints, with the aim of monitoring retail markets, the service provider should give the regulator access to these data.
8. A single point of contact should deliver, in every country, free information and advice on consumer issues.
9. Before submitting a complaint to a third party body, customers should first contact their service provider to explain their complaint and try to solve it directly with the provider.
10. In order for a customer to get in contact with a third party body, a wide range of channels should be available, and, in any case, more than one, even if – at a later stage – a written document may be necessary for a formal procedure with the ADR body.
11. Alternative dispute resolution should be made available to all household customers preferably without charge or as inexpensively as possible irrespective of the financial amount of the dispute.
12. Regarding third party bodies, complaint handling standards should be determined at a national level and be effective.
13. Customers whose complaints have been settled in their favour by an alternative dispute resolution body should be allowed a fair compensation from their services providers.
14. When a regulator deems it appropriate to collect data on complaints, with the aim of monitoring retail markets, it should have the possibility to receive relevant information from third party bodies as well as from service providers. Data on complaints can be used by regulator who decides to publish reports on complaints, within the framework of its retail market monitoring activities.
15. Third party bodies having responsibility for customer complaints could provide and publish reports on complaints they have received.