

Protecting customers under competition

The introduction of competition for all customers will allow Tasmanians to choose their electricity retailer.

A comprehensive consumer protection framework was introduced in 2012, which implemented key protections required under the National Energy Customer Framework. In addition, further protections will be introduced with the introduction of competition on 1 January 2014.

NATIONAL ENERGY CUSTOMER FRAMEWORK

The Tasmanian Government has implemented the National Energy Customer Framework (NECF), which includes a range of legal protections for electricity. NECF covers the following:

- standard contract terms and conditions that must be offered to customers;
- ensuring that customers always have access to a standard contract for electricity supply;
- specific protections for customers who are facing financial hardship or who rely on life support equipment;
- acceptable marketing practices;
- providing customers with information about products, prices and their rights; and
- customer complaint handling and dispute resolution.

Guaranteed access to an electricity supply contract

Every small customer will have a designated retailer who must offer them a standard retail contract. This means that a customer will never be in a situation where no one will agree to supply them with electricity.

Every small customer will also be assigned a 'Regulated Offer Retailer' who will have to supply electricity to that customer at regulated prices, if requested.

This means customers will always have access to an option where the prices are set according to what the Tasmanian Economic Regulator considers to be fair and reasonable.

Customers facing financial hardship

Retailers will be required to have customer hardship arrangements in place to identify customers who are having trouble paying their electricity bills.

Retailers are required to develop and maintain a customer hardship policy, which must meet minimum legal requirements. At a minimum, if customers inform their electricity retailer that they are experiencing financial difficulties, they must be offered a payment plan to make the bill payments more manageable.

Marketing practices

Australian Consumer Law ensures that customers are protected from unwelcome, unethical or misleading marketing practices by retailers who engage in marketing activities to try to attract and keep customers.

NECF also requires additional protections for electricity customers, which include the requirement on retailers to provide certain information to customers and to obtain specific informed consent before entering into contracts.

Customers also have the power to prevent electricity retailers from contacting them to market their products by:

- asking to be placed on the Australian Government's 'do not call' list, visit <https://www.donotcall.gov.au>;
- displaying a 'do not knock' sticker, available from the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission website www.accc.gov.au; and
- asking to be placed on an energy provider's 'do not contact' list, which they must maintain under NECF.

YOUR POWER. YOUR CHOICE.

Tasmanian Energy Reform

Customer information

Under NECF, customers have a legal right to be provided a range of information by both retailers and distributors. When a retailer offers you a contract they will be required to supply you with an Energy Price Fact Sheet, which includes key information such as:

- charges for electricity and gas and any fixed or standing charges;
- all fees;
- all discounts and rebates; and
- other key information such as the length of contract, options for solar customers and where you can access the full terms and conditions.

As part of NECF, the Australia Energy Regulator has launched a free independent comparison service that allows customers to compare electricity contract offers in their area – see: <http://www.energymadeeasy.gov.au/>.

This service does not currently apply in Tasmania, but will automatically ‘go live’ with the start of competition for households and small businesses.

Complaints and dispute resolution

NECF requires that electricity retailers and distributors publish on their websites a set of procedures for responding to customer complaints, which must be consistent with the applicable Australian Standard for complaint handling.

All electricity retailers are required to have appropriate complaint resolution procedures in place. If a customer has a complaint, they are expected to contact their electricity retailer first to try and resolve the issue in the first instance.

Retailers and distributors also have a requirement to inform a customer that they can refer the matter to the energy ombudsman in their State or Territory if the customer is not satisfied with how complaint was handled. The Ombudsman’s contact details are as follows:

Phone: 1800 001 170 (free call in Tasmania); or
1300 766 725

Email: Ombudsman@ombudsman.tas.gov.au

Fax: (03) 6233 8966

Street: Ground Floor 99 Bathurst Street, Hobart 7000

Postal: GPO Box 960 Hobart 7001