Responses to AEMC draft report
The Power of Choice

Introduction

One Big Switch welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the draft of the AEMC's Power of Choice report.

It's a sign of the speed of change in this area and our own nascent story that we were not able to contribute to the initial report.

But our experiences in running the recent Big Electricity Switch campaign means we now have specific reform ideas to add.

One Big Switch exists to enable consumers to unlock and realise the power of their own data. Businesses appreciate the value of this data. Customers should be able to share in it too.

While you can ask for your usage data, under various protocols, it can take too long and come back in bulky and consumer-unfriendly packages.

There's scope for whole new industries to develop and collect, measure and interpret usage data, around energy and other essentials.

In the Victorian market some players, including Origin, are beginning to release devices, such as web-based portals, to help consumers track how much power they are using on an hourly basis.

It’s a welcome start but needs to go further by permitting consumers the right to access their own data in an electronic and portable format.

Independent third parties can then interpret their usage, give them advice on energy efficiency and set savings goals, and even assist to switch retailers where there’s a better offer.

The key is for the consumers to be free to voluntarily share their data with those intermediaries who can help them make better choices and find better offers.

There could be more competition and innovation to guide consumers but first the gates to the data need to be unlocked.

We would submit schemes currently being developed in the UK and USA, known respectively as midata and Green Button, show how consumers can be empowered with their own data.

Governments in these countries appreciate how new sectors of the economy use innovation to respond to the challenge to collect, interpret and communicate the data for consumers.

In Australia we are beginning to see the start of similar, if more limited initiatives, but these initiatives should not just be driven by electricity retailers.

Who is One Big Switch?

One Big Switch is a next generation consumer network, established to build real consumer power.

Consumers who join One Big Switch don't have to accept the world as they find it; they can demand and get more.

One Big Switch launched in Australia in July 2011, with the Choice Big Bank Switch, a campaign to cut the cost of mortgages using the power of group switching. 40,000 Australian consumers took part.

In July this year, we launched the Big Electricity Switch to help cut bills through collective switching. It was joined by more than 250,000 households and became one of Australia's largest and fastest-growing consumer campaigns.

One Big Switch is a for profit business always looking for new ways to save its members time, trouble and pay less for their regular household bills.

Specific responses to recommendations and questions in the draft report

2.3.1 Timely and accessible energy and metering data to consumers

Draft recommendations chapter 7.7 and chapter 7 (page 25)

Support. We emphasise the need for a standard format for the data, timely provision and a scale of fees, should there be any at all, which reflects only the realistic costs of provision.

Questions (page 28)

Fees. Generally we believe there should be no fee payable for the provision of most metering data. The issues around standard format need to include what additional services, if any, should be chargeable.

Draft recommendation (page 28)

2.3.2 Transfer of energy and metering data to authorised consumer agents

Support. It's crucial authorised third parties can readily get access to data with up to date systems. Systems should in the main be online.

Questions (page 37)

5. We believe the provisions of the ACL should be sufficient to cover many of those providing DSP services.

Draft Recommendation (page 52)

4.3.3. Arrangements to support commercial investment in technology

Support. The contestable model should be the only way forward in meter provision, as it is for retail electricity provision.

Draft Recommendation (page 95)

6.3.1 Building consumer confidence through education

Support. This initiative should not be limited to government and industry. While there is a great need to boost energy literacy and engagement there can be other players, such as the third parties providing DSP, who can provide consumer friendly information.

Overseas energy data freeing schemes worth consideration:

Midata

http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/consumer-issues/consumer-empowerment/personal-dataa

The UK government is working with business and consumer groups to give people greater access to, and power over, the data which companies might hold about them.

Called the midata project it's designed to allow consumers to get their personal and transactional data in a safe and portable format.

It's part of the Department of Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) consumer empowerment strategy to help give greater insight into spending habits and improve buying decisions.

The UK's consumer minister Norman Lamb summed it up: "midata will allow consumers greater insight into their everyday consumption and lifestyle habits by using applications and intermediaries to analyse their actual behaviours and thereby empower them to make better spending choices and secure the best deals.

"This will boost competition between companies in terms of value and service, and stimulate innovation in new data management tools and systems."

The three main intents of the project are listed as:

- Securing widespread private sector participation
- Allowing consumers access to their data
- Encouraging businesses to develop innovative services and applications to interpret and use the data for consumers.

The important part is a common data standard for the storage of the information. The UK scheme proposes to make it compulsory for suppliers to provide the data on request.

In consultations around midata, businesses have said given compliance and data security and storage costs, they should be able to charge a reasonable fee for providing the service.

The midata future also includes benchmarking: the ability to compare your spending, energy use or other comparators with those who are similar to you.

Green Button

http://www.greenbuttondata.org/

In the US, industry leads the voluntary Green Button project following a White House call-to-action to give electricity customers easy access to their usage data.

Using a consumer and computer-friendly format with a common technical standard, data is reached via a green button on the utilities website.

Software developers and online businesses can use the information to create innovative applications to help consumers manage energy use and save on their bills.

The project started in early 2012 and so far the commitments from utilities means 27 million homes will be able to access their energy data from their retailer's website.

Consumers are encouraged to ask their retailers to provide information in the Green Button format. The Department of Energy has an online map to show the progress utilities are making.

The department has run an *Apps for Energy* contest to spur the creation of tools and services to help consumers get information, take action, and save on their utility bills.

"As the number of utilities around the country offering Green Button data increases, the importance of these applications will continue to grow," said Secretary of Energy Dr Steven Chu.

"Equally important is the effort to create a thriving, energy-focused developer community that is committed to using technology to address real-world challenges, like reducing energy waste. "

The winner called Leafully, helps customers visualize their Green Button data as a variety of units, such as the amount of trees needed to offset an individual's energy usage.

Leafully encourages users to set energy savings goals and to share their progress on Facebook.

Many businesses have already developed online and smartphone applications to help consumers choose the best rate plan for their usage patterns, provide individual energy-efficiency tips and choose the right type of solar PV panels.

Summary

We believe the energy and vitality of the web-development community, once set free on issues around usage data, can come up with a range of apps and tools consumers will find compelling.

But this can only happen if the data is unlocked in the first place.

It must be available in a common standard which interests consumers, is portable and can fire up independent enterprise.

For these things to happen we shall require some leadership from the decision makers in the electricity sector and the commitment to put consumers' interests where they should rightly be — first.