

## **PUAF CONSUMER CHARTER**

The Public Utilities Access Forum (PUAF) was established in 1989, around the time of plans to privatise the publicly owned companies providing energy, water and communications services to domestic consumers.

This Consumer Charter identifies the principles by which PUAf believes the companies which provide these essential services should be regulated and managed, with the objective of everyone having access to the services at a price that is affordable.

Competition in the provision of utility services has brought some gains. But not all consumers have gained equally. It has also exposed the difficulties which the 'market' has in delivering social objectives, for example in setting tariffs and addressing debt.

PUAF has a particular concern for consumers who are on a low income, face discrimination, have particular needs or are excluded from power. PUAf believes that everyone requires a basic level of provision to ensure an adequate standard of living.

### **Principles of PUAf's consumer charter**

- Consumers should individually and collectively be able to exercise genuine influence on the policies and practices of utility providers and the bodies which regulate them. Consumers with low incomes, or who are otherwise disadvantaged, should be an integral part of the arrangements for representation or consultation.
- The rights of consumers should be clear, unambiguous and extensively promoted. They should include entitlement to compensation when these rights are not fulfilled. An easily accessible, fair and independent complaints procedure should also be available free of charge to the consumer(s) affected.
- Utility services need to be delivered in ways consistent with sustainable development, which encompasses economic, environmental and social objectives. PUAf gives particular emphasis to the achievement of social objectives, believing these to be given the lowest priority and the least understood.
- The provision of essential services at an affordable cost is fundamental. Affordability requires definition, which should reflect society's expectations of what is both acceptable and affordable. Regular monitoring is required to establish whether affordability and accessibility are being achieved. Universal service obligations which are legally enforceable should be established as a means of ensuring affordable and equitable access to utility services.
- All consumers should be entitled to a minimum standard of service. PUAf believes that everyone should have access to a continuous supply of water, electricity, gas (where connected) and a basic telephone service (incorporating the ability to receive incoming calls and to make emergency calls free of charge) regardless of payment history.

- Consumers should be able to choose the method and frequency of payment which best suits their needs and given targeted advice on ways to cut unnecessary expenditure. The recovery of arrears should be flexible, sensitive to the individual's circumstances and based on their ability to pay.
- Special services and adapted equipment should be available at no extra charge to people with special needs due to age, disability or infirmity Examples are 'talking' bills, 'text' telephones and modified household appliances.

## **Annex**

### **Defining affordability**

PUAF has developed a provisional definition of affordability as “no household should have to spend more than twice the median percentage of expenditure on each service to meet their requirements.” However, PUAF recognises that that this is an area in which more work is required and therefore will work with others to establish a clear and appropriate definition.

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