



AUSTRALIAN  
ENERGY  
REGULATOR

# Better Bills Guideline Behavioural and Consumer Research

**Targeted focus group findings**

Culturally and linguistically diverse consumers

**2 August 2021**

# Background

The Australian Energy Regulator is in the process of developing a Better Bills Guideline, which will regulate how retailers prepare and issue bills to customers with the goal of ensuring that consumers are able to easily understand their bills and how to seek assistance in relation to their bills.

The Guideline will be informed by insights and research from a range of sources, including the focus groups summarised in this report. The Guideline development process will also be informed by:

- prior research in this area, including the findings of the *Electricity information to fit the bill* report (2018)
- a review of other existing research, including published academic literature and publicly available reports
- stakeholder submissions to the AEMC rule determination process, including confidential research findings submitted by retailers
- online behavioural studies conducted by the Behavioural Economics Team of the Australian Government (BETA) on behalf of the AER
- targeted focus groups with older consumers aged 65 and over who don't typically engage with their bill online (conducted by Hall & Partners on behalf of the AER).

**The targeted focus groups summarised in this report were designed to ensure that the research is more representative of the Australian population by capturing the perspective of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) consumers.**

Participants were selected on the basis of speaking a language other than English at home, with specific language groups chosen according to their population size and lack of community support, lower levels of English and a strong desire for in-language engagement.

To overcome language barriers, each group was facilitated by two in-language educators from the Ethnic Communities Council of NSW.

The AER developed the discussion guide in collaboration with BETA, and summary reports and translated transcriptions were provided to the AER for analysis.

# Data collection summary

## Focus groups with culturally and linguistically diverse consumers

Facilitated by in-language educators from the Ethnic Communities Council of NSW

*n* = 56

**Face-to-face**

**Hybrid**

Face-to-face and  
online

**Online**

Zoom

Arabic

*n* = 8

Korean

*n* = 8

Chinese  
Cantonese

*n* = 8

Chinese  
Mandarin

*n* = 16

Urdu

*n* = 8

Vietnamese

*n* = 8

# Discussion guide summary

## SECTION A

### Welcome and introduction

10 minutes

Background

Anonymity

Ground rules

## SECTION B

### Billing experiences and behaviours

30 minutes

Receiving the bill

Understanding the bill

Getting help

Calling energy providers

Using the interpreter service

Paying the bill

Improving the bill experience

## SECTION C

### Complex bill

20 minutes

First reaction

Content

Format

Comprehension

Getting help

Improving the bill

## SECTION D

### Basic bill

20 minutes

First reaction

Content

Format

Comprehension

Getting help

Improving the bill

## SECTION E

### Conclusion

10 minutes

Most important issue

Thank you

# Sample bills

Sections C and D of the discussion guide involved showing participants one of two sample bills before asking a series of questions about each bill.\* The sample bills were designed by BETA with reference to a prototype bill developed for previous BETA research (*Electricity information to fit the bill*, 2018) based on a literature review, focus groups, user testing and a framed field experiment.

**EnergyCo** www.energyco.com.au  
 Enquiries 13 66 27  
 Emergencies 13 74 90

Account holder: Alice Williams  
 Account number: 351932  
 Issue date: 1 April 2021  
 For supply at: 13 Bridge Road, Carlingford NSW 2118

**Your electricity**  
 466kWh used in 31 days  
 This bill covers 1 Mar 2021 – 31 Mar 2021

**Your bill**  
 \$95.41  
 Due 27 April 2021  
 Usage discount 15%  
 You saved \$18.23 off this bill.

**Understand your plan**  
**Your plan**  
 EnergyCo Simple saver  
 Contract expires 1 June 2021  
 15% Usage discount (applies to peak and off-peak usage charges only)

**Rates**  
 \$1.02 per day supply charge  
 29 cents per kWh peak usage (6am-10pm)  
 13 cents per kWh off-peak usage (other times)  
 9 cents per kWh paid to you for solar exports

**Could you save money?**  
 We have identified a cheaper plan for you.  
 You could save **\$81.45** a year by moving to our **EnergyCo Super Saver Plan**.  
 To move plans, call us on 13 66 27 or go to [www.energyco.com.au](http://www.energyco.com.au)  
 To look at other plans available for you in the market, go to [energymadeeasy.gov.au](http://energymadeeasy.gov.au)

**Technical terms**  
**1 kWh (kilowatt-hour)** is about as much power as using a laptop for a whole day.  
**Your usage** is any electricity that you have paid for. It does not include any of the solar power that you used yourself.  
**Your solar exports** are the electricity you sold to the grid. They don't include the amount of your own solar energy that you used while the sun was shining.  
**Your supply charge** is a fixed daily fee that keeps you connected to the electricity grid, and keeps power coming to your home.

Previous Reading	Current Reading	Electricity (kWh)	Rate	Charges
19808	20189	381 kWh	\$0.29kWh	\$110.49
10008	10093	85 kWh	\$0.13kWh	\$11.05
15% usage discount				-\$18.23
Supply charge (for 31 days)				\$1.02/day
				\$31.02
<b>Sub-total</b>				<b>\$134.90</b>
GST				\$13.49
Solar exports	8174	8763	-589 kWh	\$0.09kWh
				-\$53.01
<b>Total bill</b>				<b>\$95.41</b>

**Payment Assistance**  
 Call 131 131  
 Help us to help you. If you are having difficulty paying your account, please contact us to discuss payment assistance.

**Interpreter Service**  
 Call 131 45  
 Servizo Interpreti  
 Dịch Vụ Thông Ngôn  
 ...  
 ڊيڪو مٽرنگ  
 Yonryin nepeawesewa

**Hearing Impaired Service**  
 Call 1300 368 536

**Concession Information**  
 You may be eligible for NSW Government Energy or Life Support rebates - call us on 13 83 14 for details.

**Electricity charges based on actual meter read**

Your plan: **Simple Saver**  
 NMI: 2043789159  
 From: 1 March – 31 March 2021 (31 days)

Previous Reading	Current Reading	Electricity (kWh)	Rate	Charges
19808	20189	381 kWh	\$0.29kWh	\$110.49
10008	10093	85 kWh	\$0.13kWh	\$11.05
15% usage discount				-\$18.23
Supply charge (for 31 days)				\$1.02/day
				\$31.02
<b>Sub-total</b>				<b>\$134.90</b>
GST				\$13.49
Solar exports	8174	8763	-589 kWh	\$0.09kWh
				-\$53.01
<b>Total bill</b>				<b>\$95.41</b>

**Average daily electricity usage and solar exports**

**How your usage compares to similar households**

**How to pay**

**DIRECT DEBIT**  
 Call us on 131 131 to set up a direct debit.

**PAY IN PERSON**  
 Pay by cash, EFTPOS or cheque at any Australia Post Office

**BY PHONE**  
 Call 136 675 to pay by Visa, Mastercard and Bankcard (up to \$1500 per bill).

**MAIL**  
 Make your cheque payable to EnergyCo and post to PO Box 412, East Richmond 3121

**BY PHONE**  
 Call 136 675 to pay by Visa, Mastercard and Bankcard (up to \$1500 per bill).

**MAIL**  
 Make your cheque payable to EnergyCo and post to PO Box 412, East Richmond 3121

**BY PHONE**  
 Call 131 816 to pay by credit card or go to [www.postbills.com.au](http://www.postbills.com.au) to pay on the internet.

**Payment Assistance**  
 Call 131 131  
 Help us to help you. If you are having difficulty paying your account, please contact us to discuss payment assistance.

**Interpreter Service**  
 Call 131 45  
 Servizo Interpreti  
 Dịch Vụ Thông Ngôn  
 ...  
 ڊيڪو مٽرنگ  
 Yonryin nepeawesewa

**Hearing Impaired Service**  
 Call 1300 368 536

**Concession Information**  
 You may be eligible for NSW Government Energy or Life Support rebates - call us on 13 83 14 for details.

**EnergyCo** www.energyco.com.au  
 Enquiries 13 66 27  
 Emergencies 13 74 90

Account holder: Alice Williams  
 Account number: 351932  
 Issue date: 1 April 2021  
 For supply at: 13 Bridge Road, Carlingford NSW 2118

**Your electricity**  
 466kWh used in 31 days  
 This bill covers 1 Mar 2021 – 31 Mar 2021

**Your bill**  
 \$95.41  
 Due 27 April 2021  
 Usage discount 15%  
 You saved \$18.23 off this bill.

Previous Reading	Current Reading	Electricity (kWh)	Rate	Charges
19808	20189	381 kWh	\$0.29kWh	\$110.49
10008	10093	85 kWh	\$0.13kWh	\$11.05
15% usage discount				-\$18.23
Supply charge (for 31 days)				\$1.02/day
				\$31.02
<b>Sub-total</b>				<b>\$134.90</b>
GST				\$13.49
Solar exports	8174	8763	-589 kWh	\$0.09kWh
				-\$53.01
<b>Total bill</b>				<b>\$95.41</b>

**How to pay**

**DIRECT DEBIT**  
 Call us on 131 131 to set up a direct debit.

**PAY IN PERSON**  
 Pay by cash, EFTPOS or cheque at any Australia Post Office

**BY PHONE**  
 Call 136 675 to pay by Visa, Mastercard and Bankcard (up to \$1500 per bill).

**MAIL**  
 Make your cheque payable to EnergyCo and post to PO Box 412, East Richmond 3121

**BY PHONE**  
 Call 136 675 to pay by Visa, Mastercard and Bankcard (up to \$1500 per bill).

**MAIL**  
 Make your cheque payable to EnergyCo and post to PO Box 412, East Richmond 3121

**BY PHONE**  
 Call 131 816 to pay by credit card or go to [www.postbills.com.au](http://www.postbills.com.au) to pay on the internet.

**Payment Assistance**  
 Call 131 131  
 Help us to help you. If you are having difficulty paying your account, please contact us to discuss payment assistance.

**Interpreter Service**  
 Call 131 45  
 Servizo Interpreti  
 Dịch Vụ Thông Ngôn  
 ...  
 ڊيڪو مٽرنگ  
 Yonryin nepeawesewa

**Hearing Impaired Service**  
 Call 1300 368 536

**Concession Information**  
 You may be eligible for NSW Government Energy or Life Support rebates - call us on 13 83 14 for details.

**Understand your bill**

**Electricity charges based on actual meter read**

Your plan: **Simple Saver**  
 NMI: 2043789159  
 From: 1 March – 31 March 2021 (31 days)

Previous Reading	Current Reading	Electricity (kWh)	Rate	Charges
19808	20189	381 kWh	\$0.29kWh	\$110.49
10008	10093	85 kWh	\$0.13kWh	\$11.05
15% usage discount				-\$18.23
Supply charge (for 31 days)				\$1.02/day
				\$31.02
<b>Sub-total</b>				<b>\$134.90</b>
GST				\$13.49
Solar exports	8174	8763	-589 kWh	\$0.09kWh
				-\$53.01
<b>Total bill</b>				<b>\$95.41</b>

**Need help?**

**Payment Assistance**  
 Call 131 131  
 Help us to help you. If you are having difficulty paying your account, please contact us to discuss payment assistance.

**Interpreter Service**  
 Call 131 45  
 Servizo Interpreti  
 Dịch Vụ Thông Ngôn  
 ...  
 ڊيڪو مٽرنگ  
 Yonryin nepeawesewa

**Hearing Impaired Service**  
 Call 1300 368 536

**Concession Information**  
 You may be eligible for NSW Government Energy or Life Support rebates - call us on 13 83 14 for details.

Sample bill 1 – Complex bill

Sample bill 2 – Basic bill

\* Note: In most cases participants were shown the complex bill first, followed separately by the basic bill, in line with the discussion guide; however, in one of the Chinese Mandarin language groups, participants were shown both bills simultaneously, and asked to share their thoughts based on a comparison of the two.

# Findings

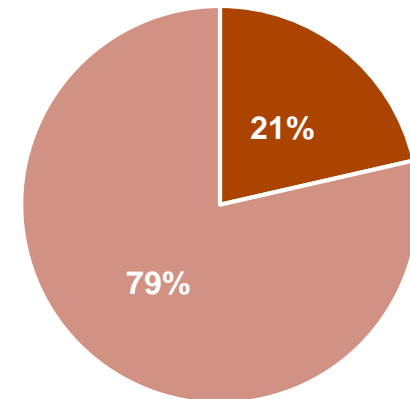
## B: Billing experiences and behaviours

- Most CALD consumers receive their bill in a digital format (generally via email), and they most commonly pay their bill by direct debit.
- On receiving their bill, these consumers typically look first at information that will allow them to pay their bill on time (amount due and due date), generally followed by information that will allow them to evaluate whether the bill is correct (discounts applied, historical and household comparison data, and rate details).
- Most CALD consumers report that they don't need help understanding their bill. However, 'understanding their bill' often seems to relate specifically to core comprehension, as many participants also report a lack of confidence in understanding how their bill is calculated.
- Among the specific comprehension challenges reported by CALD consumers in reading their existing bills, the most common are:
  - technical terms (e.g. NMI, kilowatt-hour)
  - detailed charges calculation
  - calculation and interpretation of graphs.

'To be honest, I don't really understand the bill. I compare with the last bill to make sure that it is not too different in charges. ... I worry that the meter reading may be wrong, and I am overcharged. If the bill is within a normal range and the comparison is reasonable with the last bill and other household, I just accept the bill.'

— Chinese Cantonese language participant

**Bill format**



■ Paper bill ■ Digital bill

# Findings

## B: Billing experiences and behaviours

- CALD consumers often report finding it difficult to engage with their energy providers over the phone, citing factors such as:
  - time and effort involved
  - inconsistency of advice received
  - difficulty communicating complex matters in this way
  - difficulty understanding assistant due to accent
  - difficulty of trying to rectify a mistake when the charge has already been paid.
- Most CALD consumers are also disinclined to use interpreter services except as a ‘last resort’ (e.g. in relation to particularly complex matters where language barriers become more salient) due to the perception that it will simply introduce more steps to the process of calling their provider, as well as (for some) a lack of confidence their language will be catered for.
- However, it was suggested that older CALD consumers may find the interpreter service more valuable.
- CALD consumers generally turn first to friends, family, community members, and even unrelated commercial officers (e.g. post office or bank officers) for in-person assistance, rather than calling their energy provider.
- Some CALD consumers suggest community-based education and communication as a more effective way to increase bill comprehension.

‘No, I don’t think I will use the [interpreter] service. It seems to take longer. And I don’t think our language is provided anyway.’

— Urdu language participant

# Findings

## C: Complex bill

- CALD consumers have mixed reactions to the level of information included on the complex bill. However, overall they tend to report that it is easy to understand, especially when it comes to the essential information which they refer to on a regular basis.
- Specific comprehension challenges raised by these consumers include:
  - technical terminology (especially greenhouse gas emissions and NMI, including how it differs from their account number)
  - detailed charges table (especially how discounts and taxes are calculated and applied)
  - plan details (including rates and ‘green energy’ component)
  - plan comparisons (including how best offer is calculated)
  - graphs.
- Participants also suggested other specific improvements to make bills simpler or easier to read, including:
  - grouping related information (especially contact numbers)
  - paying more attention to visual presentation (including white space, font size and graphs)
  - replacing graphs with tables, in some cases.

‘Total usage is clear. I love page 1 – not as much information as in my current bill but listed all that I need to know about my plan and amount of money I need to pay.’

— **Vietnamese language participant**

‘Some parts, I don’t understand but that does not affect my understanding of the bill.’

— **Urdu language participant**

‘I believe all given information is necessary and I may need the information later on as a record.’

— **Arabic language participant**



# Findings

## D: Basic bill

- Reported confidence in comprehension is higher for the basic bill than the complex bill, as the reduced level of information also reduces the level of comprehension required. However, both bills have high reported confidence when it comes to core comprehension (e.g. language, core content).
- Overall, CALD consumers tend to respond that the basic bill is ‘too simple’ and lacking important or valued information, such as:
  - current and historical usage details
  - plan and detailed charge information
  - solar export information
  - definitions.
- However, participants in multiple groups suggested that this bill structure may be preferable for some consumers, especially older consumers.
- Participants in the Vietnamese language group suggested allowing consumers to select their preferred bill format.
- Some consumers across groups expressed an interest in seeing additional information that was not included on either of the bills (e.g. energy-saving tips, current plan expiry date, previous balance carried forward, contact number business hours).

‘There is not much information on it. It just has basic numbers. I understand the language okay.’

— **Chinese Cantonese language participant**

‘I think it is too brief. But maybe some people would prefer this.’

— **Korean language participant**

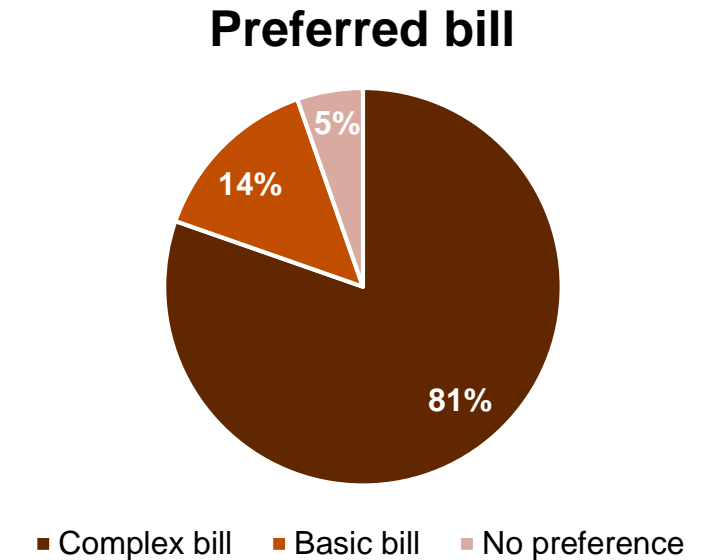
‘I prefer the comprehensive bill for myself but 100% sure my parents will choose this simple bill. I love the idea of the options to choose which bill we want.’

— **Vietnamese language participant**

# Findings

## E: Conclusion

- When asked which of the sample bills they preferred, participants overwhelmingly indicated a preference for the complex bill.\* This preference seems to have three key drivers:
  - It is important to have access to this information when needed (e.g. to evaluate whether their bill is correct or to dispute incorrect charges).
  - They value information that could help them save money on their bill (including energy-saving tips, benchmarking, and historical usage).
  - They can choose not to read this information on a regular basis, but would find it difficult to access if it was not on their bill.



‘I prefer to have the [complex bill]. I would like all information printed there – even if I don’t have time to read now, I might need them later. The comparison of the client’s previous bill’s total should be listed. Nothing on both bills should be removed.’

— Chinese Mandarin language participant

‘I prefer [the basic bill] as it is easier and more simplified. ... Bills should be precise, simple, accessible and understandable for everyone. Not only for those who are smart and educated.’

— Urdu language participant

\* Note: This preference is stated in spite of the fact that the complex bill was described as ‘the hard bill’ by group facilitators, while the basic bill was described as ‘the easy bill’, which could have created a subconscious bias towards the basic bill; the 8 participants who indicated they preferred the basic bill were in the Arabic (1), Korean (1) and Urdu (6) language groups.

# Findings

## E: Conclusion

- Some participants in the Korean, Chinese Mandarin, and Urdu language groups suggested providing in-language bills and resources (e.g. retailer website, educational brochures).
- Beyond the bill itself, issues raised as important by CALD consumers include:
  - the negative impact of using estimated rather than actual meter reads (Urdu and both Chinese Mandarin language groups)
  - the inherent complexity of choosing between so many plans, and the potential value of simplifying plan structures and naming (Arabic and Chinese Mandarin language groups)
  - the importance of encouraging energy efficiency (Chinese Mandarin and Vietnamese language groups)
  - the value of community-based education to improve bill comprehension and energy market engagement among CALD consumers (Arabic and Vietnamese language groups).

‘Estimated readings may be convenient for the energy companies, but for consumers, the system will leave them perplexed.’

— Urdu language participant

‘Often estimates are always in their favour and they tend to estimate higher. If they estimated 3 times in a row which was my case, it was quite hard for me to calculate and it was almost impossible to get the whole matter straight. It took 2–3 months and at the end I just gave it all up.’

— Chinese Mandarin language participant

‘I wish to have sessions in language in the community to be explained about the electricity bill and its content. Channels like community newspaper, magazine, radio and other social media which the most members in the respective community get information from. ... People who receive the information [at] the information session will share what they have learnt to their friends and family. Word of mouth is one of the most powerful channels in CALD community.’

— Arabic language participant

# Limitations and considerations

## Qualitative approach

Every research approach is used for a specific purpose that takes into account its inherent strengths and limitations, and should always be interpreted in light of these. The strengths of qualitative research include the ability to gain deeper insights into the 'why' and 'how' of stated preferences and behaviours through emergent lines of questioning. However, this approach is inherently limited in scope, and data is also influenced by group dynamics and conscious cognitive processes (e.g. rationalisation).

## Data collection

Due to the purpose of these focus groups in exploring the perspective of culturally and linguistically diverse consumers who speak languages other than English at home, it was important to collect data in these consumers' first languages. As a result, the groups were facilitated not by trained researchers but by in-language educators. While this had the vital advantage of removing language barriers, it is also likely to have affected the depth and rigour of emergent lines of questioning.

## Ordering effect

Most consumers were shown the complex bill first, followed by the basic bill. This could have influenced consumers' preferences through an ordering effect, with participants' inherent loss aversion producing a more negative reaction to the basic bill than might have otherwise been the case, as they perceived a 'loss' of information in moving from the first bill to the second. However, this seems less likely given that all participants in the group shown the bills simultaneously also preferred the complex bill.