



# **Guidance on electricity consumption benchmarks on residential customers' bills**

May 2012

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AER reference: 45734 / D12/70330

### Amendment record

| Version | Date        | Pages |
|---------|-------------|-------|
| 1.0     | 25 May 2012 | 22    |
|         |             |       |

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# 1 Introduction

During 2004, the Ministerial Council on Energy (MCE, now Standing Council on Energy and Resources (SCER)) agreed on the implementation of the National Framework for Energy Efficiency (NFEE). The NFEE provides a coordinated national approach for a range of enhanced energy efficiency measures. One of the measures delivered through the NFEE is a requirement that energy retailers provide electricity consumption benchmarks on a residential customer's bill. The purpose of the benchmark is to allow customers to compare their household electricity usage with similar households in their area. This in turn will assist consumers to make more informed choices about how they use energy.

The Consumer Information Implementation Committee (CIIC) is one of a number of committees formed to implement the NFEE. The CIIC has overseen extensive research and consultation with stakeholders on the development of the electricity consumption benchmarking measure and continues to inform its operation.

The National Energy Retail Law (Retail Law) and National Energy Retail Rules (Retail Rules) were developed by the MCE through extensive consultation and contain the electricity consumption benchmarking provisions. It is expected that the Retail Law and Retail Rules will commence on 1 July 2012. The requirement that retailers provide electricity consumption benchmarks to residential customers is contained in the Retail Rules.

This document - *Guidance on electricity consumption benchmarks on residential customers' bills* (Guidance) – has been developed to assist energy retailers understand the electricity bill benchmarking requirements of the Retail Law and Retail Rules. It explains the law in simple language and gives general information and examples but is no substitute for the Retail Law and Retail Rules. Retailers should review the obligations in the Retail Law and Rules, as well as the guidance contained in this document, when providing electricity consumption benchmarks to their customers.

Unless explicitly defined, terms used in this document have the meanings given in the Retail Law and Retail Rules. Terms not defined in the Retail Law and Retail Rules have their ordinary meaning.

The AER may amend, update or revise the Guidance from time to time and will do so in consultation with stakeholders.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Electricity consumption benchmark obligations

A retailer must prepare a bill so that a small customer can easily verify that the bill conforms to their customer retail contract, and for residential customers it must include the energy consumption benchmarks.<sup>1</sup>

Retailer obligations in relation to the presentation of electricity consumption benchmarks are set out in Rule 170. This Rule stipulates that a retailer must provide:

- (a) a comparison of the customer's electricity consumption against the electricity consumption benchmarks;<sup>2</sup>
- (b) a statement indicating the purpose of the information provided with respect to those benchmarks;<sup>3</sup> and
- (c) a reference to an energy efficiency website.<sup>4</sup>

A retailer must present the information specified above in a way that is easy for the customer to understand.<sup>5</sup> In addition, a retailer is required to present the information specified above in a graphical or tabular form, as appropriate, but may do so in a location on the bill that is convenient for the retailer.<sup>6</sup>

### 2.2 Initial electricity consumption benchmarks provided to retailers

The Retail Rules specify that the electricity consumption benchmarks must be based on the following:

- (a) electricity consumption information received by the AER from distributors pursuant to rule 171;<sup>7</sup>
- (b) localised zones as determined and notified to the AER by the relevant jurisdictional Minister;<sup>8</sup> and
- (c) household size.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> r. 25(1)(o), National Energy Retail Rules.

<sup>2</sup> r. 170(1)(a), National Energy Retail Rules.

<sup>3</sup> r. 170(1)(b), National Energy Retail Rules.

<sup>4</sup> r. 170(1)(c), National Energy Retail Rules.

<sup>5</sup> r. 170(3), National Energy Retail Rules.

<sup>6</sup> r. 170(2), National Energy Retail Rules.

<sup>7</sup> r. 170(3)(a), National Energy Retail Rules.

<sup>8</sup> r. 170(3)(b), National Energy Retail Rules.

<sup>9</sup> r. 170(3)(c), National Energy Retail Rules.

The CIIC commissioned the economic consultancy firm ACIL Tasman (ACIL) to develop the initial benchmarks based on localised zones and household sizes, in line with the requirements of the Retail Rules.<sup>10</sup>

The AER provided retailers with provisional nominated local zones and the names of those zones by way of letter dated 21 October 2011. By letter dated 30 November 2011, final zone information for all states and territories were provided to retailers.

The AER provided retailers the initial benchmarks, as an electronic attachment, by way of letter dated 20 December 2011.<sup>11</sup> Also attached to the letter was ACIL's report, *Electricity bill benchmarks for residential customers*, which describes the methodology that was undertaken by ACIL to develop the benchmarks. ACIL's report is also available on AER's website: [www.aer.gov.au](http://www.aer.gov.au).

## **2.3 Subsequent electricity consumption benchmarks provided to retailers**

Under the Retail Rules, the AER is required to administer the electricity consumption benchmarks and update them at least every three years (from the date the initial benchmarks are published).<sup>12</sup> The updated electricity consumption benchmarks will be provided to retailers and published on the AER website.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> r. 169(3), National Energy Retail Rules.

<sup>11</sup> ACIL Tasman, *Electricity bill benchmarks - final data - December 2011*, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> r. 169(5), National Energy Retail Rules.

<sup>13</sup> r. 169(4), National Energy Retail Rules.

## 3 Localised zones

The Retail Rules specify that the electricity consumption benchmarks must be based on localised zones.<sup>14</sup> Localised zones, including the zone names and the postcodes that constitute each zone, are determined by the responsible Minister within each jurisdiction.<sup>15</sup>

A retailer must use the localised zone benchmark relevant to each customer's location.

By way of letter dated 21 October 2011, the AER provided retailers with provisional nominated local zones and the names of those zones. By letter dated 30 November 2011, final zone information for all states and territories were provided to retailers.

### 3.1 Managing new postcodes not allocated to a zone

Where a new postcode is created and retailers have residential customers residing in this area, the AER considers the following approach should be followed.

As the new postcode will not be allocated to a localised zone, there will be no electricity consumption benchmark information that can be applied to those customers who reside within the new postcode.

Retailers should not postpone the billing of these customers due to the lack of specific electricity consumption benchmark information for the new postcode. Nor should retailers issue potentially non-compliant bills that do not include any benchmark information.

For those customers residing in a new postcode (which is not yet allocated to a localised zone), the retailer should use the 'full state' benchmark applicable to the customer, which provides benchmarks for the entire state or territory. The 'full state' benchmark data can be found in the *Electricity bill benchmarks - final data*. Retailers could also highlight in their purpose statement that due to a customer residing in a new postcode, benchmarks for the entire state or territory have been used.

Where this occurs, the retailer should notify the AER as soon as possible. The AER will then advise the relevant Minister responsible, so that the new postcode can be appropriately allocated to a localised zone. The AER will notify retailers once it has received advice that the new postcode has been allocated to a localised zone.

### 3.2 Reallocation of zones

The Retail Rules require the relevant jurisdictional Minister to determine and notify the AER of the localised zones, and the benchmarks must be based on these zones.

The AER is also required to update the electricity consumption benchmarks at least every three years from the publication of the initial benchmarks.

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<sup>14</sup> r. 169(3)(b), National Energy Retail Rules.

<sup>15</sup> r. 169(3)(b), National Energy Retail Rules.

Any consequential changes to the localised zones made by the relevant jurisdictional Minister will be reflected in the updated benchmarks.

When updating the benchmarks, the AER will contact relevant jurisdictional Ministers to check if any reallocation of postcodes or localised zones is required. After a revision to the electricity consumption benchmarks is complete, the AER will provide the updated electricity consumption benchmarks to retailers and publish them on the AER's website.

### **3.3 Name of localised zones**

The Retail Rules are silent as to whether to include the name of the zone that the residential customer belongs to on the benchmark information provided on the bill. It is, therefore, at the discretion of the retailer whether to include this information. However, it is likely to be of assistance to customers if the name of their zone is included in their bill so they can better understand on what basis the comparison is being made. It may also help a retailer to satisfy the obligation that the electricity consumption benchmark information is presented in a way that is easy for the customer to understand.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> r. 170(3), National Energy Retail Rules.



## 4 Household size

The Retail Rules specify that the electricity consumption benchmarks must be based on household size.<sup>17</sup> ACIL has provided benchmark data for six categories of household sizes, ranging from a household size of one person, and then increasing by one person at a time, to a household size of six people. For households of more than six people, ACIL has also provided data on the amount of electricity consumption each additional person at would add to the benchmark. Adding household size information makes the benchmarks more accurate and relevant to consumers, as it is a key factor that drives the amount of electricity consumed.

The Retail Rules are silent in relation to how many household size benchmarks should be included on a bill. However, a retailer must have regard to the requirement that the electricity consumption benchmark information be presented in a way that is easy to understand.<sup>18</sup> The CIIC has suggested that including four or five household sizes on the bill would be sufficient to allow most customers to identify with a particular household. This will then enable the customer to identify the relevant benchmark and compare that with their own level of electricity consumption.

Customers will also be able to access benchmark information for all household sizes (including households with a higher number of occupants) on the AER's *Energy Made Easy* website ([www.energymadeeasy.gov.au](http://www.energymadeeasy.gov.au)).

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<sup>17</sup> r. 169(3)(c), National Energy Retail Rules.

<sup>18</sup> r. 170(3), National Energy Retail Rules.

## 5 Seasonal benchmarks

Due to the strong correlation of weather and electricity use, ACIL has developed electricity consumption benchmarks based on seasons.

### 5.1 Using seasonal benchmarks

Under the Retail Rules, retailers are required to provide a comparison of the customer's electricity consumption against the electricity consumption benchmarks provided by the AER.<sup>19</sup> The benchmarks, as developed by ACIL on behalf of the CIIC and provided to retailers by the AER, are seasonal benchmarks.

The AER recognises that electricity consumption benchmarking is one of several measures designed to help consumers make more informed choices about how they use energy. The objective of electricity consumption benchmarks is to help customers reduce their consumption by enabling them to make informed decisions, resulting from comparing their usage to the benchmark.

Whilst the CIIC has advised retailers that including the benchmarking information on customers' bills delineated by season is optional, it has also strongly encouraged retailers to consider the benefits to householders (and retailers themselves) of providing seasonal benchmarks. To this end, the AER shares CIIC's view that the use of seasonal electricity consumption benchmarks (as provided to retailers) offers customers a significantly more meaningful basis of comparison, thereby promoting more informed decision making.

The AER is concerned that if retailers adapt the benchmark data to remove seasonality, this could compromise the integrity and accuracy of the data. Furthermore, it will not reflect any underlying changes in a customer's consumption during different seasons and is therefore likely to result in an alternative benchmark that is less relevant, less accurate and more difficult for the customer to understand.

A retailer who does not use the seasonal benchmark data as presented in the ACIL report (and accompanying data spreadsheet) and provided by the AER must take appropriate measures to ensure that the resultant benchmark allows a customer to compare their consumption accurately and that it is relevant and easy for customers to understand.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> rr. 170(1)(a) and 169, National Energy Retail Rules.

<sup>20</sup> r. 170(3), National Energy Retail Rules.

## 5.2 Which season to display on a bill

ACIL has recommended that retailers use the benchmark for the season that applied on the date the customer's meter was read, as it provides the best statistical fit with the data.<sup>21</sup>

ACIL has assigned the seasons as follows:

- Summer, 1 December to 28 (or 29) February;
- Autumn, 1 March to 31 May;
- Winter, 1 June to 31 August; and
- Spring, 1 September to 30 November.<sup>22</sup>

## 5.3 Displaying more than one season on a bill

Retailers may choose to include benchmarks for more than one season on all customers' bills, provided they meet the requirement that the information be presented in a way which is easy for the customer to understand.<sup>23</sup> The AER expects this will assist some customers to understand and identify how their electricity consumption changes with seasons.

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<sup>21</sup> ACIL Tasman, *Electricity Bill Benchmarks for residential customers*, 2011, p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> ACIL Tasman, *Electricity Bill Benchmarks for residential customers*, 2011, p. 54.

<sup>23</sup> r. 170(3), National Energy Retail Rules.

## 6 Other benchmark information

### 6.1 Daily and quarterly figures

The benchmarks developed by ACIL and provided by the AER to retailers include both daily and quarterly figures. Although the Retail Rules are silent in relation to using daily or quarterly figures, a retailer must meet the requirement that the electricity consumption benchmark information be presented in a way which is easy to understand.<sup>24</sup>

When deciding whether to use daily or quarterly figures, a retailer may have regard to how often the customer is billed and the other consumption information provided on the bill (for example, their total consumption for the billing period or their average daily consumption over the period). This information will form the basis of the comparison that the customer will make with the benchmark. If the customer is billed quarterly then it would be likely that the quarterly and/or daily figures would be easiest to understand.

If a customer is billed more frequently than quarterly, it is likely that the daily consumption benchmarks would be most accurate and easy for the customer to understand and compare. Rule 25(k) of the Retail Rules requires retailers to provide a customer's average daily consumption during the billing period. Therefore, in all cases, a customer would be able to compare their average daily consumption with daily benchmark information. This may help retailers to satisfy the requirement that the electricity consumption benchmark information is presented in a way which is easy to understand.<sup>25</sup>

ACIL's benchmark data spreadsheet recommends using the daily consumption figures to 'build up' a monthly benchmark, should this be preferred.

### 6.2 Nominated electrical equipment and house size

ACIL has also provided benchmarks with an additional factor of nominated electrical equipment included. Using this additional data, customers can find a benchmark relevant to them according to key pieces of electrical equipment they have, including: electric hot water systems, electric cook tops and either air conditioning (summer) or electric central heating (autumn, winter and spring).

In 'non-gas' jurisdictions, Northern Territory and Tasmania, nominated electrical equipment is substituted for house size, as there is a strong correlation between house size and electricity consumed in these regions. House sizes are characterised as follows: small, up to five rooms; medium, six to nine rooms; and large, 10 to 12 rooms. It should be noted that house size and household size refer to different factors. Household size is the number of people living in a house (occupants), whereas house size relates to the number of rooms in a house.

The Retail Rules do not require a retailer to include benchmark information incorporating the additional factors of nominated electrical equipment or house size.

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<sup>24</sup> r. 170(3), National Energy Retail Rules.

<sup>25</sup> r. 170(3), National Energy Retail Rules.

In future, the AER anticipates that customers will be able to access benchmark information which includes the additional factors of nominated electrical equipment or house size on the AER's Energy Made Easy website ([www.energymadeeasy.gov.au](http://www.energymadeeasy.gov.au)).

## 7 Required Statements and References

### 7.1 Statement of purpose

Rule 170(1)(b) of the Retail Rules requires a statement which indicates the purpose of the information provided with respect to the electricity consumption benchmarks to be included on a residential customer's bill. Retailers may develop their own statement to satisfy r. 170(1)(b). However, a retailer must ensure that the statement is easy for the customer to understand.<sup>26</sup> The AER and CIIC, developed the following possible statements as examples for retailers to use as their own statement of purpose or in developing their own statements:

- This information has been provided to help you compare your electricity usage with other households in your region.
- This information illustrates how your electricity usage compares to similar households in the <name of region> region.
- Compare your electricity usage with benchmarks for similar households in your area.
- How does your electricity use compare with the average use for households in your area?

#### 7.1.1 Swimming pool information

The benchmark provided by ACIL assumes that the customer does not have a swimming pool, as only a small number of households have swimming pools and swimming pools greatly increase electricity use.

Customers with swimming pools generally use more electricity and when comparing their electricity consumption to the benchmarks on their bill, they are likely to compare unfavourably. Retailers can include information on the customer's bill that the benchmarks provided assume that the customer does not have a swimming pool. However, we recognise that space on bills is generally limited and so if this is not possible, retailers will need to ensure that they are equipped to respond to queries from these customers seeking to understand the differences between their consumption and the benchmark, and where potential energy savings can be made.

In future, the AER anticipates that customers will be able to access further benchmark information for households with pools on the AER's *Energy Made Easy* website ([www.energymadeeasy.gov.au](http://www.energymadeeasy.gov.au)).

### 7.2 Reference to an energy efficiency website

Rule 170(1)(c) requires retailers to reference an energy efficiency website on residential customers' electricity bills. For the purposes of this rule, an energy efficiency website is a

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<sup>26</sup> r. 170(3), National Energy Retail Rules.

website, containing information about electricity consumption benchmarks that is prescribed by the National Regulations and notified by the AER on its website.<sup>27</sup>

As notified to retailers by way of letter dated 21 December 2011, the *Energy Made Easy* website ([www.energymadeeasy.gov.au](http://www.energymadeeasy.gov.au)) will be the required reference and will be prescribed in the National Energy Retail Regulations (Retail Regulations). Retailers must therefore print the URL for *Energy Made Easy* to meet the requirements prescribed in r. 170(1)(c). For the avoidance of doubt, the AER considers this requirement will not be satisfied if the retailer references an alternative URL that subsequently redirects the customer to the *Energy Made Easy* website.

The *Energy Made Easy* website will host the AER's price comparator functions as well as information on the electricity bill benchmarks and general information about energy efficiency. The website will also enable residential customers to access more customised benchmark data.

Retailers have discretion in wording their reference to the *Energy Made Easy* website. However, a retailer must ensure that the statement is easy for the customer to understand.<sup>28</sup> The AER and CIIC consider the following sentence would meet the requirements of r. 170(1)(c):

- To find out more about how the average household energy usage is calculated, get some energy efficiency tips and compare retail energy prices, visit [www.energymadeeasy.gov.au](http://www.energymadeeasy.gov.au)

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<sup>27</sup> r. 170(4), National Energy Retail Rules.

<sup>28</sup> r. 170(3), National Energy Retail Rules.

## 8 Format of the benchmarks

### 8.1 Using graphical or tabular formats

Rule 170(2) of the Retail Rules requires a retailer to present the comparison of a customer's electricity consumption against electricity consumption benchmarks in a graphical or tabular format.

A retailer may use a graph, table or both to present electricity consumption benchmarks. Retailers must have regard to how it will format the electricity consumption benchmark information to ensure that it is easy for the customer to understand.<sup>29</sup>

Mock-up benchmarks were prepared by the CIIC and can be found in AER and CIIC's letter to retailers of 21 October 2011. Whilst all of these mock-ups were in graphical format, there is no intention to suggest that the graphical format should have favour over the tabular format.

Appendix A contains examples of possible graphical and tabular formats for the electricity consumption benchmarks.

### 8.2 Expectations regarding 'easy to understand'

Rule 170(3) of the Retail Rules requires a retailer to provide the following information in a manner which is easy for the customer to understand:

- comparison of the customer's electricity consumption against the electricity consumption benchmarks
- the statement of purpose, and
- the reference to the energy efficiency website.

To ensure that this information is 'easy to understand', a retailer should ensure it uses plain language, and is an appropriate size and style of font. In addition, any colours and shading used should be clearly visible and consistent with accessibility standards. The benchmark information should be clearly set out and positioned on the bill. Customers should be able to readily identify the household size and consumption benchmark that is applicable to their circumstances.

### 8.3 Location on the bill

Rule 170(2) of the Retail Rules requires a retailer to provide the electricity consumption benchmark information on a location on the bill that is convenient to the retailer. In addition, r. 25(1)(o) of the Retail Rules requires a retailer to include in bills for residential customers, energy consumption benchmarks in accordance with Part 11 of the Retail Rules.

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<sup>29</sup> r. 170(3), National Energy Retail Rules.



The benchmark must be located on the bill. It can be placed at the end of the bill or on a separate page within the bill. However, a retailer should not include the benchmark on a separate leaflet or insert which is included with the bill (but not on the bill).

## **9 Benchmarks for residential customers**

### **9.1 Residential customers who are subject to both residential and business tariffs**

Rule 170(1)(a) of the Retail Rules requires retailers to provide electricity consumption benchmarks on the bills for all residential customers.

If a single bill is issued to a customer that covers both residential and business tariffs then the electricity consumption benchmark information must appear on the customer's bill. In such circumstances, it would be beneficial for the retailer to ensure that the statement of purpose that is provided on the bill (r. 170(1)(b)) clearly stipulates that the benchmarks only relate to residential consumption.

### **9.2 Residential customers who have a single bill issued for both electricity and gas**

If a single bill is issued to a customer for both electricity and gas, a statement should be included on the customer's bill which outlines that the electricity consumption benchmarks provided on the bill only relate to their electricity consumption and not to their gas consumption.

### **9.3 Can customers opt-out?**

Residential customers cannot opt out of receiving electricity consumption benchmark information on their bill. It is a requirement under rr. 170 and 25 of the Retail Rules for a retailer to provide energy consumption benchmarks and ancillary particulars in a bill for a residential customer.

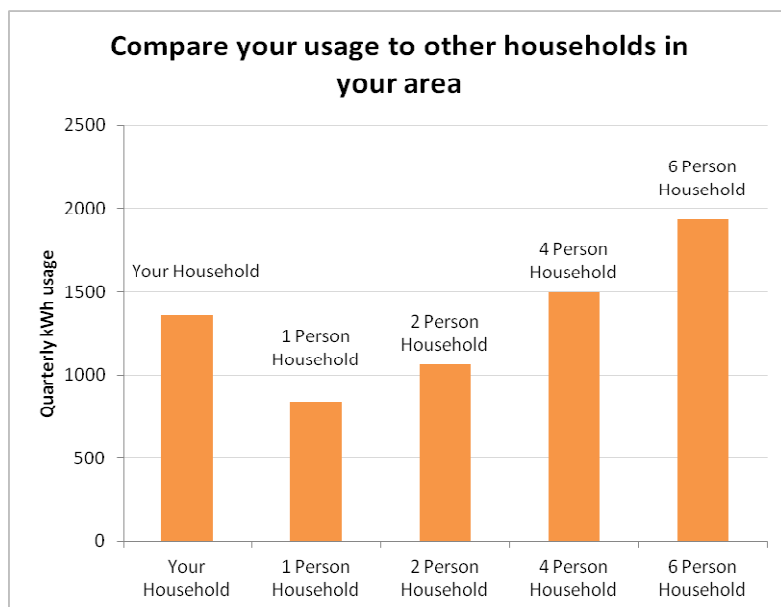
## 10 Transitional arrangements

The Retail Law and Retail Rules are expected to commence on 1 July 2012. As advised in Joint Implementation Group Bulletin No. 4 (March 2012), a transitional period of three months will be allowed for retailers to achieve compliance with the relevant electricity consumption benchmark requirements of the Retail Rules. This means that the electricity consumption benchmarks will not be required on any electricity bills before 1 October 2012. Additional, jurisdiction-specific transitional provisions may be included in state or territory legislation to implement the Retail Law and Rules. This guidance operates subject to any such provisions.

## Appendix A – examples of benchmark formats

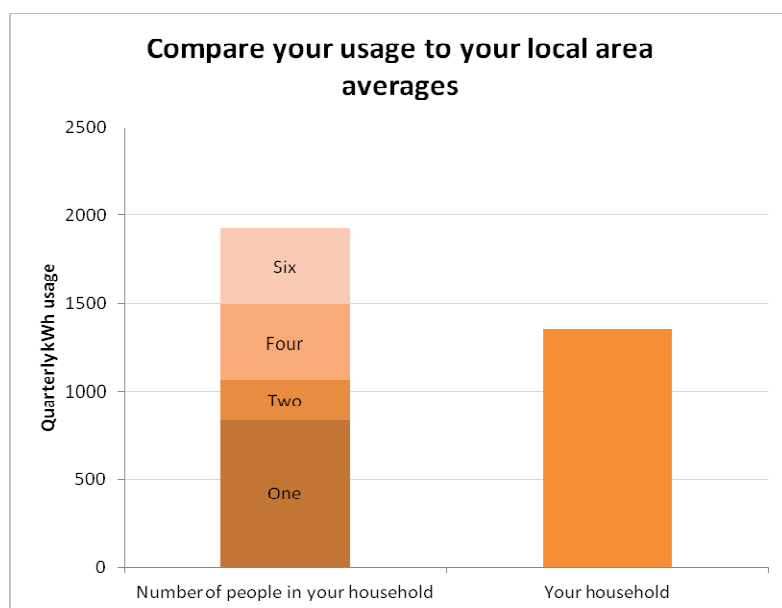
Samples of graphical format presentations of electricity consumption against benchmarks based on samples provided by CIIC to energy retailers on 21 October 2011.

### Graphical format, sample 1



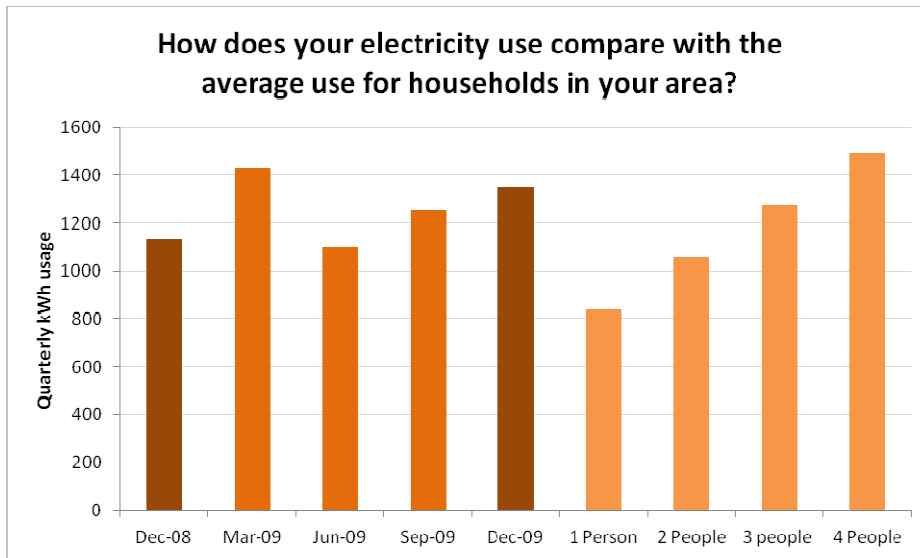
To find out more about how the average household energy usage is calculated, get some energy efficiency tips and compare retail energy prices, visit [www.energymadeeasy.gov.au](http://www.energymadeeasy.gov.au)

### Graphical format, sample 2









To find out more about how the average household energy usage is calculated, get some energy efficiency tips and compare retail energy prices, visit [www.energymadeeasy.gov.au](http://www.energymadeeasy.gov.au)

### Graphical format, sample 3



To find out more about how the average household energy usage is calculated, get some energy efficiency tips and compare retail energy prices, visit [www.energymadeeasy.gov.au](http://www.energymadeeasy.gov.au)

### Tabular format, sample 1

| Compare your electricity usage with benchmarks for similar households within Victoria in summer |                                  |
|---|----------------------------------|
| Number of people in your household  | Average daily consumption (kWh)* |
|              | 9.2                              |
|              | 11.6                             |
|              | 14.0                             |
|              | 16.4                             |
|              | 18.8                             |
|              | 21.2                             |

\*No Pool

|                                      |
|--------------------------------------|
| Your average daily consumption (kWh) |
| 17.3                                 |

To find out more about how the average household energy usage is calculated, get some energy efficiency tips and compare retail energy prices, visit [www.energymadeeasy.gov.au](http://www.energymadeeasy.gov.au)

## Tabular format, sample 2

This information has been provided to help you compare your electricity usage with other households in your region.

| Average daily consumption (kWh)* |      |      |      |      |      |      |                                   |
|----------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-----------------------------------|
| Household size                   | 1    | 2    | 3    | 4    | 5    | 6    | Consumption for each extra person |
| Summer                           | 9.2  | 11.6 | 14   | 16.4 | 18.8 | 21.2 | 2.4                               |
| Autumn                           | 9.1  | 11.9 | 14.6 | 17.4 | 20.2 | 23   | 2.8                               |
| Winter                           | 12.4 | 14.8 | 17.1 | 19.5 | 21.8 | 24.2 | 2.4                               |
| Spring                           | 11.9 | 14.3 | 16.8 | 19.3 | 21.7 | 24.2 | 2.5                               |

\*No pool

To find out more about how the average household energy usage is calculated, get some energy efficiency tips and compare retail energy prices, visit [www.energymadeeasy.gov.au](http://www.energymadeeasy.gov.au)

**Your Average Daily Consumption**

17.3 kWh