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**How accessible are energy switching services? Research Note**

**Research Objectives**

The aims of this research, were

* To investigate how accessible and easy to use these sites and services are for disabled and older energy consumers, including for users of assistive technology, and
* To increase awareness of the accessibility and usability needs of disabled and older customers, when designing, accrediting and promoting switching websites and services.

Our research was funded through The Energy Redress Scheme and the findings have been published and promoted as consumer guidance, to help enable disabled and older consumers to make informed choices.

It is also hoped that the research findings and recommendations will provide increased understanding for industry, regulators and policy makers about the needs and experiences of disabled and older energy consumers when switching.

**Methodology**

The research included three main elements:

* A survey to explore disabled and older energy users' needs and experiences when switching energy providers using cost comparison sites and switching services
* Desk research and content evaluation of 16 of the most popular switching websites (identified from the survey), to identify their key features and areas of content.
* User evaluations of the accessibility and usability of 16 of the most popular sites and services by a panel of disabled people from RiDC’s Consumer Panel.

**Research elements**

**Survey**

In March 2021, an online survey was sent to 2500 disabled and older people who are members of the RiDC Consumer Panel. The survey explored disabled and older energy users' needs and experiences when switching energy providers and when using energy price comparison sites and switching services.

We received 548 valid responses.

**Desk research & content evaluation**

Over 40 energy cost comparison websites and switching services were identified in our desk research. 16 of the most popular sites, identified from our survey, were then evaluated in terms of their provision of customer service and different types of information identified in our survey as being of value to disabled and older customers.

**User evaluations of accessibility and usability**

To get direct feedback from users about which websites best suit their accessibility and information needs, RiDC’s researchers and 16 of our panel members evaluated the ease-of-use and accessibility of 16 of the most popular price comparison websites or switching services on the market.

Panel members with the following impairments and assistive technologies undertook remote unmoderated evaluations of these websites:

* 4x Blind/screen-reader users
* 4x Moderately visually impaired/screen magnification users
* 4x Dexterity and mobility impaired/keyboard navigation
* 4x Cognitive and learning impaired

The following price comparison websites and switching services were evaluated:

1. Money Supermarket

2. Uswitch

3. Money Saving Expert

4. Compare the Market

5. Go Compare

6. Which?

7. Confused

8. Simply Switch

9. Look After My Bills

10. Energy Helpline

11. Citizens Advice

12. The Energy Shop

13. Switch Gas and Electric

14. My Utility Genius

15. Energylinx

16. Quotezone

**How were these websites evaluated?**

**1. Following the user journey**

In order to identify barriers and points of pain along the user journey, participants were asked how easy or difficult it was to perform the following actions on each website:

* Searching for and accessing the website from their web browser
* Viewing the website’s homepage
* Locating and accessing the energy comparison section
* Filling in personal details (i.e. postcode, information about their current energy supplier and tariff)
* Viewing listed energy deals

The following accessibility features, identified from Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 and specific to each impairment group and assistive technologies were considered throughout the user journey:

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| --- | --- |
| **Impairment/assistive technology** | **Accessibility features** |
| Blind, dyslexic or cognitive/screenreader and text-speech software | * Alternative text or relevant alternative text on images and iconography * Use of semantic HTML mark-ups on headings, paragraphs, lists or tables on form-fields and results pages * Logically-ordered content * Clearly communicated error messages |
| Low vision, light and low-contrast sensitivity or colour blindness/screen magnification software or text size or colour adjustments | * Sufficient colour contrast between foreground (e.g. text, images, iconography) and background colours (i.e. at least 4:5:1 and 3:1 for large text) * Readable text size and font style * Limited moving, flashing and blinking content * Adequate spacing between words and lines * Support for text resizing or colour adjustments * Full visibility of content when using screen magnification |
| Dexterity, mobility (unable to use a mouse) or blind/keyboard-only access | * Ability to tab to all elements (i.e. links, form fields, buttons) * Ability to tab away from all elements * Logical tab order (i.e. top to bottom, left-right sequence) * Full functionality with a keyboard * Clear visual focus on tabbed elements (i.e. links or buttons are highlighted or have a grey outline) * Ability to tab through drop-down menus on form fields, using arrow keys without triggering an action |
| Cognitive or learning | * Plain and understandable language (i.e. avoidance of complex words, jargon or acronyms) * Ease of avoiding and correcting mistakes when filling out personal details * Clear layout and design * Clear instructions * Use of illustrations or iconography clarifying content |

**2. Assessing the overall user experience**

* **Heuristic evaluation**

We developed a set of accessibility heuristics (i.e. positive descriptive statements) for participants to evaluate their overall experience of using each website. These heuristics reflected key principles outlined by Web Content Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 – perceivability, operability, understandability, and robustness.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **WCAG 2.1 principle** | **Accessibility heuristics** |
| **Perceivability** – Information and website components must be presented in ways they can perceive | “Overall, the text size was readable”  “The colour contrast between text/images and background was good”  “I was not distracted by flashing or blinking content” |
| **Operability –** Website components and navigation must be operable | “The website was easy to navigate” |
| **Understandability** – Information and the operation of website components must be understandable | “The content was written in plain and understandable language”  “The details of the energy deals were easy to understand”  “There were clear instructions and support” |
| **Robustness –** Content must be robust enough that it can be reliably interpreted by users and assistive technologies | “My chosen input method/assistive technology worked effectively” |

Participants were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale to what extent they agreed with the above statements about the website.

* **Accessibility Usability Scale (AUS)**

An Accessibility Usability Scale, consisting of ten questions, was administered at the end of each evaluation to measure the usability of the website when employing assistive technology. Participants were again asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale to what extent they agreed with the following ten statements:

1. “I would use this website frequently, if I had reason to”
2. “I found the website unnecessarily complex”
3. “I thought the website was easy to use”
4. “I think I would need the support of another person to make use of all of the features of this website”
5. “I found that all of the features of the website made sense and were compatible with my device, browser and/or assistive technology”
6. “I thought there was too much inconsistency in how the website worked”
7. “I would imagine that most people with my device and/or assistive technology would learn to use this website quickly”
8. “I found the website very cumbersome or awkward to use”
9. “I felt very confident using this website”
10. “I needed to familiarise myself with the website before I could use it effectively”

Responses to the above statements were assigned a scale position (strongly disagree= 1, disagree= 2; neither agree nor disagree= 3; agree= 4; strongly agree= 5). For positive statements (questions 1,3,5,7 and 9), scores were calculated by subtracting 1 from the scale position, and then multiplying the resulting number by 2.5. For negative statements (questions 2,4,6,8,10), scores were calculated by subtracting the scale position from 5, and then multiplying the resulting number by 2.5.

Scores ranged from 0 to 100, with scores over 68 considered ‘Good’ and scores over 80 ‘Excellent’.

**Research findings and recommendations**

Our findings and recommendation are published at[**www.ridc.org.uk**](http://www.ridc.org.uk)**.**