



# Switch on to dementia

How energy companies can help people with dementia and their carers



Working in partnership with



<b>Document purpose</b>	This report details the experiences that people with dementia and carers have in working with energy companies, and the changes that need to be made in order to improve their experiences.
<b>Title</b>	Switch on to dementia: How energy companies can help people with dementia and their carers
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<b>Target audience</b>	This report is intended for a wide range of organisations, including partners from energy companies, government and researchers.
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## Forewords

Dementia can affect every area of someone's life. The way they use energy and their relationship with their energy supplier is no different.

This report looks at some of those experiences – from difficulty managing the temperature in their home to complications their carer has getting their Lasting power of attorney recognised.

This report makes recommendations on what actions can be taken to improve this situation and ease the struggle that people with dementia face every day.

This work was made possible through a grant from E.ON. We are thrilled to be working with them as one of their charity partners.

With numbers of people with dementia in the UK set to increase to over a million by 2021 and over two million by 2050, it has never been more timely to take action and improve the lives of people with dementia.



Jeremy Hughes  
Chief Executive  
Alzheimer's Society



At E.ON we want to create a better tomorrow by helping all of our customers with their energy needs and putting them at the heart of our business.

The energy world has changed and is continuing to change at a rapid pace. Technological innovation is pushing the boundaries of what we can offer our customers, but to help customers we need to understand them first, not just some, or even most, but all of our customers. This is important in the context of this report because it is the reason we commissioned it.

Only by listening to and working with our customers will we put them in control of their energy use and this is especially important when considering the needs of people who may face challenges, such as living with dementia.

Our partnership with Alzheimer's Society goes far beyond this report. During our partnership, my 9,400 UK colleagues and I will spare no effort in raising as much money as we possibly can to support its work and we will continue to look together for practical opportunities to further help people affected by dementia and their carers.



Michael Lewis  
Chief Executive  
E.ON UK



# 1

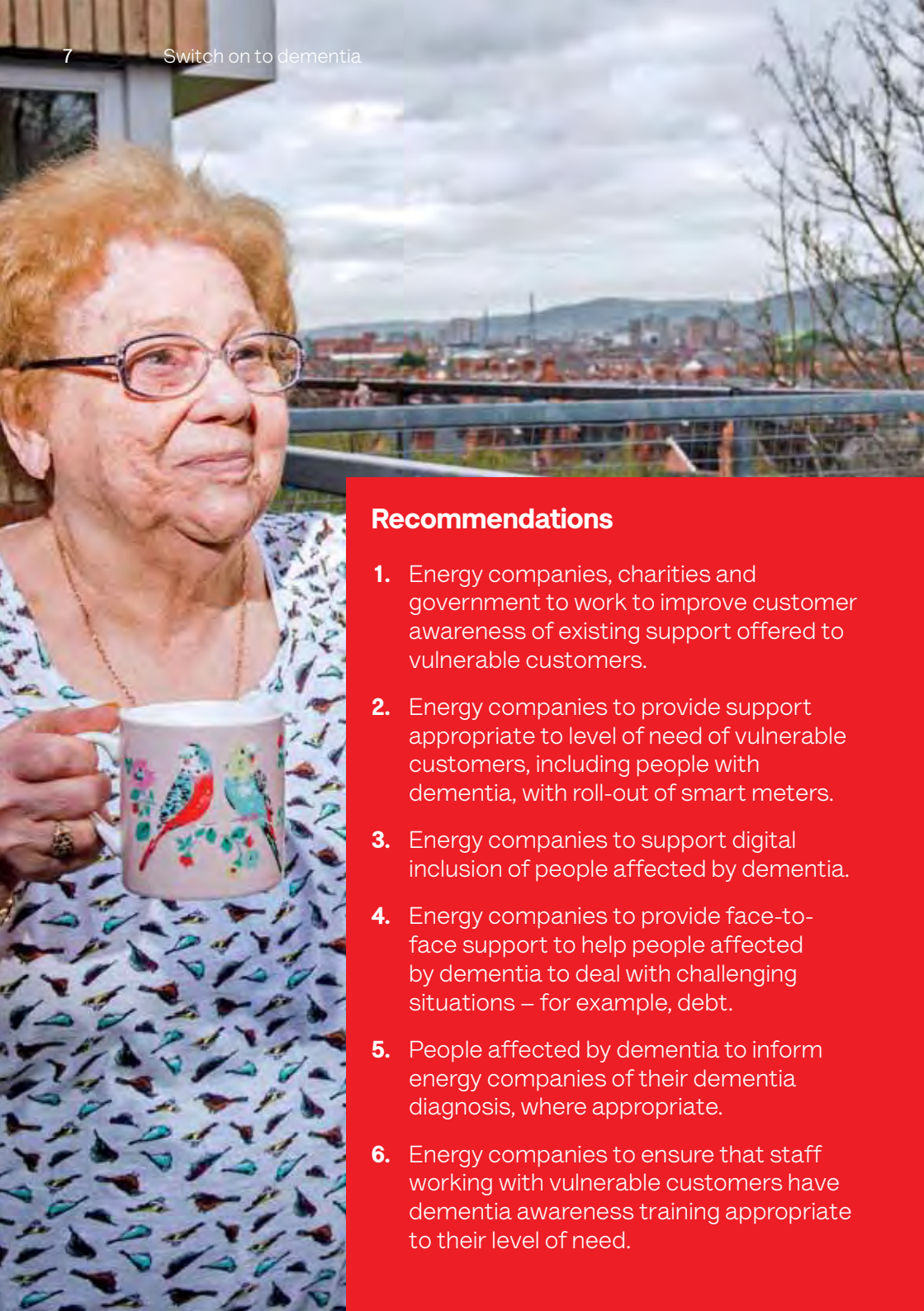
## Introduction

People with dementia and their carers can experience problems managing energy use and their relationship with their energy company. In this report, Alzheimer's Society and E.ON have considered the issues that people affected by dementia face, and make recommendations to energy companies that may help.

People with dementia are particularly vulnerable to problems related to energy use and their relationship with energy companies as they tend to use more energy. In addition to the normal reduction in our ability to regulate our body temperature as we age, people with dementia generally have more difficulty regulating their body temperature, which may lead to them preferring a warmer environment (Van Hoof, 2008). This can result in higher heating bills and problems managing energy in a household where a person with dementia lives with someone who does not have the condition.

Confusion and memory problems can mean that people with dementia struggle to manage their relationship with their energy company. This can have significant consequences. Forgetting to pay a bill, for instance, can result in debts and, in cases where a customer is not identified as vulnerable, their energy supply could be cut off. Confusion and memory problems can also mean that people with dementia struggle to manage their energy usage (Lewis, 2015).

To understand these issues in more detail and improve the future customer experience of people affected by dementia, Alzheimer's Society and E.ON talked to people with dementia and carers about their experiences of energy use and managing their relationship with energy companies. Alzheimer's Society organised three focus groups attended by people with dementia of different ages. This was supplemented by an electronic survey and telephone interviews with carers.



## Recommendations

1. Energy companies, charities and government to work to improve customer awareness of existing support offered to vulnerable customers.
2. Energy companies to provide support appropriate to level of need of vulnerable customers, including people with dementia, with roll-out of smart meters.
3. Energy companies to support digital inclusion of people affected by dementia.
4. Energy companies to provide face-to-face support to help people affected by dementia to deal with challenging situations – for example, debt.
5. People affected by dementia to inform energy companies of their dementia diagnosis, where appropriate.
6. Energy companies to ensure that staff working with vulnerable customers have dementia awareness training appropriate to their level of need.

## 2 The experiences of people affected by dementia

Alzheimer's Society used focus groups, surveys and telephone interviews to explore people with dementia and carers' experiences of energy companies. This identified areas where energy companies are already improving the customer experience. It also found areas where further improvement is required.

### 1 Communication over the phone

People with dementia told Alzheimer's Society that they were concerned about the move from communicating in writing with their energy company to communicating over the telephone and online (see below). Problem areas included long menus, waiting times and speaking to multiple people when phoning their energy company.

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**'Their call centres are often abroad and can be really noisy which makes it difficult to understand them.'**

Person with dementia

**'I'm often put on hold for quite a long time and by the time they put me through to somebody I've forgotten what I phoned up about.'**

Person with dementia

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People with dementia expressed a strong preference for communicating in writing with their energy company. They told us that a direct, free-to-call contact number would help in cases where communicating over the phone was the only option.



## 2 Communication with carers

Carers told Alzheimer's Society that they found it difficult to act on behalf of the person with dementia. In one example, a carer who had a Lasting power of attorney (LPA) was still not allowed to speak on behalf of the person they cared for.

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**'The energy company refuse to speak to me or my mum despite them being aware that my dad, whose name is on the account, has dementia. They need to acknowledge that my parents are married and that my mum can speak on dad's behalf. Even though I have explained to the company that I have power of attorney for my dad they are not prepared to talk to me. They keep requesting the original copies of the legal documents which I am not prepared to send so we are currently in a stand-off... they need to gain a better understanding of dementia and how it affects people.'**

Carer for a person with dementia

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People affected by dementia would benefit from clearer processes for dealing with LPAs that are understood by all staff and are customer friendly. For instance, carers told us that some energy companies only accept original versions of LPAs. This caused anxiety for carers about loss of the document. Energy companies could amend their processes to accept certified photocopies of the LPA, which are legally valid, to resolve this issue.

### 3 Dementia training for staff

People affected by dementia told Alzheimer's Society that they could not always contact someone who understood their needs. However, when they were able to do so, trained staff had a positive impact.

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**'On contacting [my energy company] regarding change of name from my husband's to mine [I was] put through to [a] person who highlighted things that are available to anyone with dementia.'**

Carer for a person with dementia

**'[Staff need] awareness of how dementia affects their customers and the measures that really need to be put in place to avoid unnecessary confusion and upset for the person living with dementia and stress and time wasting for the carer.'**

Carer for a person with dementia

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People with dementia told Alzheimer's Society that a dedicated team of customer service advisers who were trained in dealing with people with specific conditions such as dementia would be very helpful. They told us that these employees would need a significant amount of training to carry out the job well.

## 4 Online

Carers told Alzheimer's Society that energy company websites helped them to manage energy on behalf of the person they care for.

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**'Their website is easy to use and means I can access my dad's account without having to speak to anyone, as he has given me permission to act on his behalf and the account log-in details. I find this much easier than trying to speak to someone.'**

Carer for a person with dementia

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However, people with dementia expressed concerns about online communication. They told Alzheimer's Society that they may struggle to use the internet, especially as the condition progresses.

In addition, half of one group did not have access to the internet. They suggested that energy companies, charities and government could provide support to help them access online services.

## 5 Detecting unusual usage

Confusion and memory problems can mean that people with dementia struggle to manage their energy usage (Lewis, 2015). Detecting unusual usage as soon as possible can help prevent excessive bills or a person's home becoming dangerously cold.

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**'[I would like to see] actual quarterly readings taken by the electric company and provision of quarterly bills so unusual usage can be picked up earlier. I now have to read the meter each time I visit to avoid an excessive annual bill because, for example, the hot water tank peak rate has been turned on and left on.'**

Carer for a person with dementia

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Carers suggested that energy companies could help prevent, detect and warn carers of unusual usage patterns. Previous research has suggested that people with dementia may benefit from specially-designed thermostats that allow temperature to be adjusted within safe limits. However, this kind of technology raises issues around informed consent and privacy that require careful consideration.

## 6 Signposting to advice and support

Energy companies can provide a lot of support to people with dementia and carers but, in some cases, support may be required from another organisation. Carers told us that signposting to advice and support had helped them to resolve problematic issues.

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**'My husband's frontotemporal dementia means that he struggles with finances and this led to us getting into debt. Our energy company were really helpful and gave me the details of a local charity which helped us clear our debt. They were polite and good at listening to me.'**

Carer for a person with dementia

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## 7 Communicating about a dementia diagnosis

People with dementia told Alzheimer's Society that they were happy to share information about their dementia diagnosis with their energy provider, subject to energy companies being very clear about how this information is used. There was concern about data security and about energy companies making assumptions about what a person with dementia, in particular in the early stages, can and cannot do. Offering additional support, for instance access to a dedicated vulnerable customers team, would encourage more people to tell their energy company about their dementia diagnosis.

## 8 Communicating in writing

People with dementia told Alzheimer's Society that their energy bills were often complicated and confusing. For instance one person had changed energy companies as she found bills from her previous energy company too confusing. However, some good practice was identified.

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**'The bills they send me are clear and concise and I know exactly what I'm being charged for. Since they have started sending me these new bills I understand the billing process so much more and they no longer confuse me.'**

Person with dementia

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People with dementia told us that they wanted energy companies to provide them with simplified bills, even if this meant missing out on potentially useful information.

### **Why is it important to let your supplier know about your diagnosis?**

It's important for us to capture information about a customer's conditions or circumstances so we can understand more about them and identify when they may need further support.

Once we understand this information we can discuss and offer a range of tailored services that meet their specific needs. These services range from referrals to third party charities, to ensuring that people are on the best products for them and if eligible adding them to the Priority Services Register. This information is then reviewed with the customer when they contact us at set intervals to make sure we continue to support them and meet their needs.

## 9 Price comparison

People with dementia told Alzheimer's Society that they want to have the same opportunities as people who do not have the condition to get a good deal on their energy bill. They told us they were frustrated that comparing their energy tariff and switching providers was too complex.

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**'It's difficult to know how much I am being charged for my energy and how much I am using. It would be really helpful to know if I was paying the most competitive rate.'**

Person with dementia

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People with dementia told us that they wanted to be made aware, in a clear and accessible format, of how much they are being charged for their energy and whether they are on the best tariff.

## 3 Smart meters

Government requires energy companies to offer smart meters to every home by 2020. Smart meters send meter readings to the energy companies electronically and can help people to see how much energy they are using. Energy companies, including E.ON, have already started rolling out smart meters for their customers.

Smart meters could help solve some of the problems that people with dementia told Alzheimer's Society about. For instance, smart meters will help people with dementia who find meter reading difficult because they do not understand the task or do not remember when meter readings need to be done.

Carers were supportive of the introduction of smart meters. One carer who had a smart meter installed said it had been helpful and that the installation was not disruptive for the person with dementia they cared for.

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**'A smart meter sounds like it would be really useful for us. It would be good to know how much energy we are using as it may make us think twice about keeping appliances on for long periods of time.'**

Carer for a person with dementia

**'They sound like a really good idea. The only thing which might be useful is a speaking option or large buttons so people who can't see or hear very well are still able to use them.'**

Person living with dementia

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However, people affected by dementia did raise some concerns. Some people told Alzheimer's Society that it could be 'off-putting and confusing' for people with dementia to learn a new way of monitoring their energy usage. People with dementia with co-morbidities, such as sight loss, may struggle in particular. Others were concerned that people with dementia may not understand smart meters and as a result they may be unaware of the benefits. To help avoid this, energy companies will need to communicate the change clearly and in plenty of time.





## Smart metering and Dementia Friends

It is intended that all British energy customers will have been offered a smart meter by the end of 2020 and we're working really hard right across our business to meet this deadline. My job involves finding ways to make the transition to smart meters as simple as possible for some of our most vulnerable customers and that's why I wanted to find out more about how we could better support people living with dementia. Having attended a Dementia Friends information session, I was really inspired by how much simply raising awareness of dementia and showing support and understanding can make a massive difference.

As a result I arranged information sessions for call centre colleagues taking part in a 'vulnerable customer smart metering' trial and all involved found the sessions really useful at increasing their own understanding of dementia and how to support people living with it. I've also now signed up to become a Dementia Friends Champion and am really looking forward to creating more Dementia Friends across our business and looking at how we can support people with dementia and their carers through the introduction and installation of smart metering technology.

**Nicola Hirst, Smart Trials Lead, E.ON**

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## Recommendations

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**Alzheimer's Society is the UK's leading dementia charity. We provide information and support, improve care, fund research, and create lasting change for people affected by dementia.**

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