

Public DEFENDER

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13%

Power price rise some customers faced on July 1



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Please help!

I need some legal advice

# Website blackout

## Consumers powerless as bill comparison tool delayed



Switching providers: Rhys, Jessica, Kristian, Nick, Gabrielle and Juliette Sansotta in their Point Clare home

Picture: Gary Graham

WHEN your electricity bill arrives don't bother searching for the State Government's promised comparison website — it won't be there.

Consumer advocates are livid about the lateness.

IPART recommended last year that the Government "implement an online pricing comparator tool to allow consumer and private pricing comparator services to access up-to-date information".

IPART then said it could run the site. But it wasn't until July this year — after another change in minister and another round of price rises kicked in — that the Government gave the go-ahead.

I understand the site address will be myenergyoffer.nsw.gov.au. There is nothing at that URL today.

I've been told there should be a "soft launch" in October, with consumers getting access after that.

"It's absolutely unacceptable to make such a commitment but take so long to put it into place," Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association policy coordinator Charmaine Crowe

said. "It should have come into play when the latest price increases came into effect." Why is such a site needed? According to IPART, some power retailers have stopped linking their discounts to regulated prices. Instead they make up a "benchmark tariff" then go door-to-door offering a discount off their made up rate.

IPART said: "In our view, offering discounts on this basis can be confusing for consumers. It can mean they enter into a negotiated contract mistakenly believing

that they are being offered a discount on regulated tariffs and are charged more than the regulated tariff." It also said a major energy company had advised that "low-income households and pensioners tend to be over-represented among the customers moving from its regulated tariffs to a negotiated contract with another retailer. It considers this is likely to be because these customer groups are more likely to be at home when door-to-door selling occurs."

Gabrielle Sansotta is one of the 35,000 people a month transferring between NSW electricity retailers. The Central Coast mum was given no choice but to switch when Integral Energy nearly trebled its charges at the end of a contract.

But the Sansottas were able to use the "retrospective transfer" rules to switch to their area's regulated distributor, EnergyAustralia.

This meant their bill was backdated. EA's vastly superior rates more than halved the Sansottas' quarterly bill, saving them \$860.

Both of these practices can amount to a criminal offence.

In these circumstances your parents-in-law will probably have a good argument to avoid the contract that they signed and to refuse to pay.

Your parents-in-law could complain to the South Australian Office of Consumer and Business Affairs and/or take the matter to court to resolve the matter.

Legal information is general in nature and not to be regarded as legal advice by Maurice Blackburn

## In-laws denied the full picture

ROBERT Selman's parents-in-law won a "free photo shoot" with a studio in Adelaide.

They turned up, had the photos done, only to then be hit with charges. They were not allowed to leave until they signed a contract.

They have still not received any photos and the studio is pursuing them for several thousand dollars.

Do they have to pay?

Have your legal queries answered on our blog with Maurice Blackburn legal expert Rebecca Gilsenan at noon today



IT SOUNDS like your parents-in-law fell victim to a studio that is advertising free services that it does not intend to supply for free. This is illegal.

It is also illegal for the studio to use undue harassment or coercion or unconscionable conduct to force people to purchase services.

Both of these practices can amount to a criminal offence. In these circumstances your parents-in-law will probably have a good argument to avoid the contract that they signed and to refuse to pay.

Your parents-in-law could complain to the South Australian Office of Consumer and Business Affairs and/or take the matter to court to resolve the matter.

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