

Workstream Report
Publication of Objection Rates for LSP Supply Points
Modification Reference Number 0255
Version 0.1

This Workstream Report is presented for the UNC Modification Panel's consideration. The Distribution Workstream considers that the Proposal is sufficiently developed and should now proceed to the Consultation Phase. [The Workstream also recommends that the Panel requests the preparation of legal text for this Modification Proposal.]

1 The Modification Proposal

Summary

The objection process is a mechanism that is detailed within the UNC to allow Shippers to prevent an LSP customer from switching supplier as a result of an erroneous transfer, or in breach of their contract. This process saves Shippers from having to re-nominate a site to return it to the correct portfolio. Ofgem has expressed concern that the objections process is used by some Shippers to retain customers, as opposed to correcting incorrect transfers, and in part this is owing to the lack of visibility surrounding objections. We propose to publish objection rates to encourage appropriate practice.

Licence Conditions

SLC 14.2 of the Supplier's licence allows Suppliers to object to any transfer of a non-domestic customer from its portfolio to that of a competitor only if:

- the contract with that customer allows for the current Supplier to prevent the Proposed Supplier Transfer. Supplier contracts generally prevent transfer if the Customer has not paid any outstanding invoice or a fixed term contract has not yet expired ; or
- the Supplier that initiated the Proposed Supplier Transfer has agreed with the current Supplier that the transfer was initiated in error.

Section 14.3 of the Supplier's licence gives a requirement to inform the customer that their transfer has been blocked, why this has been done and possible remedies.

UNC provisions

The Supply Point Transfer process is currently operated by xoserve, under the auspices of the UNC, and so this is where the objection process operates in practice. The relevant section that deals with such a process is Section G of the UNC, specifically Section G2.8.1(b), which allows an Existing Supplier to lodge a Supply Point Objection within seven business days after the new Supplier has submitted a Supply Point Confirmation.

If an Objection is lodged, then the Transporter will not be active in determining the merits of the objection, but it will be up to the Suppliers to resolve

the issue.

Concerns with current process

This regime was clearly intended to help prevent incorrect transfers occurring, so avoiding the need for Suppliers to re-nominate a site to correct the error. At present the current regime is open to abuse. There is currently no requirement in either the licence or the UNC for a Supplier to justify why an objection has been raised to either the Transporter or the new prospective Supplier, even if the objection is clearly spurious. There is therefore no constraint placed upon this process to prevent abuse by Suppliers, and there is a considerable body of anecdotal evidence that certain Suppliers object to a Supply Point Transfer to gain time to renegotiate a lower contract with the customer prevent their transfer and possibly lock them into a further fixed term contract. At the very least raising spurious objections create additional work for Suppliers in ensuring their customer transfers on time.

In addition to this lack of oversight, there is no public reporting on the number or frequency of objections that are raised by a Supplier. In the unlikely event of a Supplier being challenged on excessive use of the process for anti-competitive practices, there is no framework in penalising the Supplier, outside of general competition law or licence enforcement. Both of these remedies are complex and expensive, and seem to be a disproportionate response for breaching a UNC provision.

It is the regulator's belief that the practice of objecting to most transfers is detrimental to the customer as it is helping to restrict the ability of that customer to switch to a lower price contract and that the objections process is used (in conjunction with automatic contract rollover) as a customer retention tool. At the very least it creates administrative inconvenience to the customer, and delays them moving to their preferred Supplier.

Proposed Solution

To address Ofgem's concerns it is proposed that greater visibility is given to the current objections regime.

To this end, xoserve will publish a quarterly report on the joint office website detailing by Shipper licence the % of LSP Supply Point Transfer Objections which are successful (i.e not withdrawn) compared to the total number of Supply Point Transfer Objections raised by that Shipper. To ensure maximum visibility this list would not be anonymous. A threshold of 10 objections would trigger inclusion on the list to ensure that low numbers of objections by Small Shippers do not result in a potentially high % result, distorting the publication of the information. It is our understanding that xoserve is currently looking at the reports it can provide as part of its Information Provision project, and that if this report is included, the additional costs would be small.

Benefits of process

A key requirement of a fully functioning market is information transparency. This modification will provide that transparency to the industry on

how frequently that the objections process is used. We would expect that all Shippers would use this error correction tool to object to some transfers on a regular basis but not to object to all, or the vast majority, of transfers. This report will highlight any such abuse of the process, and so will help deter such anti-competitive activity.

2 User Pays

a) Classification of the Proposal as User Pays or not and justification for classification

The costs involved are minimal if this change is incorporated into the xoserve Information Provision project, so we do not believe that it is cost effective to recover costs under the User Pays mechanism.

b) Identification of Users, proposed split of the recovery between Gas Transporters and Users for User Pays costs and justification

This modification does not require a User Pays charge.

c) Proposed charge(s) for application of Users Pays charges to Shippers

This modification does not require a User Pays charge.

d) Proposed charge for inclusion in ACS – to be completed upon receipt of cost estimate from xoserve

This modification does not require a User Pays charge.

3 Extent to which implementation of the proposed modification would better facilitate the relevant objectives

Standard Special Condition A11.1 (a): *the coordinated, efficient and economic operation of the pipe-line system to which this licence relates;*

Implementation would not be expected to better facilitate this relevant objective.

Standard Special Condition A11.1 (b): *so far as is consistent with sub-paragraph (a), the (i) the combined pipe-line system, and/ or (ii) the pipe-line system of one or more other relevant gas transporters;*

Implementation would not be expected to better facilitate this relevant objective.

Standard Special Condition A11.1 (c): *so far as is consistent with sub-paragraphs (a) and (b), the efficient discharge of the licensee's obligations under this licence;*

Implementation would not be expected to better facilitate this relevant objective.

Standard Special Condition A11.1 (d): *so far as is consistent with sub-paragraphs (a) to (c) the securing of effective competition: (i) between relevant shippers; (ii) between relevant suppliers; and/or (iii) between DN operators (who have entered into transportation arrangements with other relevant gas transporters) and relevant shippers;*

Publication of this information will help encourage use of the objections process only as a mechanism to correct erroneous transfers or when the contract with the customer provides for it, and not as a customer retention tool. This will encourage appropriate behaviour, so improving competition by reducing the current level of unnecessary administration experienced by Shippers in handling spurious objections.

Standard Special Condition A11.1 (e): *so far as is consistent with sub-paragraphs (a) to (d), the provision of reasonable economic incentives for relevant suppliers to secure that the domestic customer supply security standards (within the meaning of paragraph 4 of standard condition 32A (Security of Supply – Domestic Customers) of the standard conditions of Gas Suppliers’ licences) are satisfied as respects the availability of gas to their domestic customers;*

Implementation would not be expected to better facilitate this relevant objective.

Standard Special Condition A11.1 (f): *so far as is consistent with sub-paragraphs (a) to (e), the promotion of efficiency in the implementation and administration of the network code and/or the uniform network code.*

This modification will encourage adherence to the provisions of the UNC and reduce the administrative burden on Shippers, so furthering this objective.

4 The implications of implementing the Modification Proposal on security of supply, operation of the Total System and industry fragmentation

No implications on security of supply, operation of the Total System or industry fragmentation have been identified.

5 The implications for Transporters and each Transporter of implementing the Modification Proposal, including:

a) implications for operation of the System:

No implications for operation of the system have been identified.

b) development and capital cost and operating cost implications:

No development or capital costs would be incurred.

c) extent to which it is appropriate to recover the costs, and proposal for the most appropriate way to recover the costs:

As the costs incurred in this process are minimal, we do not feel that it is economic to recover the costs that are incurred by the transporter.

d) Analysis of the consequences (if any) this proposal would have on price regulation:

No such consequence is anticipated.

6 The consequence of implementing the Modification Proposal on the level of contractual risk of each Transporter under the Code as modified by the Modification Proposal

No such consequence is anticipated.

7 The high level indication of the areas of the UK Link System likely to be affected, together with the development implications and other implications for the UK Link Systems and related computer systems of each Transporter and Users

No changes to systems would be required as a result of implementation of this Proposal.

8 The implications of implementing the Modification Proposal for Users, including administrative and operational costs and level of contractual risk

Administrative and operational implications (including impact upon manual processes and procedures)

This proposal is likely to reduce the number of spurious objections that are raised by Shippers, reducing the administration undertaken overall by Shippers in handling customer transfers.

Development and capital cost and operating cost implications

There is likely to be a reduction in operating costs for Shippers as fewer spurious objections are raised.

Consequence for the level of contractual risk of Users

No such consequence has been identified.

9 The implications of implementing the Modification Proposal for Terminal Operators, Consumers, Connected System Operators, Suppliers, producers and, any Non Code Party

The primary purpose of this modification proposal is to benefit Customers. Publishing the rate of objections that are raised by each Shipper, will discourage unfounded objections. This will reduce the instance of consumers having their

transfer delayed or blocked unnecessarily, so reducing the level of customer dissatisfaction generally and ultimately improving perception and operation of the gas market.

10 Consequences on the legislative and regulatory obligations and contractual relationships of each Transporter and each User and Non Code Party of implementing the Modification Proposal

No such consequences have been identified.

11 Analysis of any advantages or disadvantages of implementation of the Modification Proposal

Advantages

- Provides transparency around the objections process
- Will provide an incentive to use objections process in line with licence requirements.

Disadvantages

None identified

12 Summary of representations received (to the extent that the import of those representations are not reflected elsewhere in the Workstream Report)

No written representations have been received.

13 The extent to which the implementation is required to enable each Transporter to facilitate compliance with safety or other legislation

No such requirement has been identified.

14 The extent to which the implementation is required having regard to any proposed change in the methodology established under paragraph 5 of Condition A4 or the statement furnished by each Transporter under paragraph 1 of Condition 4 of the Transporter's Licence

No such requirement has been identified.

15 Programme for works required as a consequence of implementing the Modification Proposal

No programme for works has been identified.

16 Proposed implementation timetable (including timetable for any necessary information systems changes)

Implementation could be immediate on receipt of a decision.

17 Implications of implementing this Modification Proposal upon existing Code Standards of Service

No implications of implementing this Modification Proposal upon existing Code Standards of Service have been identified.

18 Workstream recommendation regarding implementation of this Modification Proposal

The Distribution Workstream considers that the Proposal is sufficiently developed and should now proceed to the Consultation Phase. [The Workstream also recommends that the Panel requests the preparation of legal text for this Modification Proposal.]