



Fees on paper bills: Assistant Minister Sukkar misses the point says Keep Me Posted

For immediate release

Assistant Treasurer Michael Sukkar has encouraged consumers to 'Go paperless to save money' launching a national education campaign to help consumers stop paying unnecessary fees to receive paper bills.

The Hon. Michael Sukkar first encouraged consumers to opt to receive digital bills before urging those who need paper bills to find out if they are eligible for fee exemptions. The implementation of an education campaign was first announced by former Minister for Consumer Affairs Michael McCormack following a Consumer Affairs Forum which recognised vulnerable consumers needed to be protected against unfair paper fees.

"This approach from the Minister is not only disappointing but shows a clear lack of understanding on the issues Australian consumers are facing in regards to paper billing fees," commented Kellie Northwood, Executive Director, Keep Me Posted. "The suggestion from the Minister is to 'Go paperless to save money'. Yet who will be saving money? Certainly not the Australian consumers who will need to buy a computer, a printer, paper and internet connection to print their bills and statements at home. The only people the Minister is saving money for in this case are the banks and super profit companies."

Keep Me Posted has advocated for a ban on paper fees on important communications for two years. The campaign, a coalition of representatives from the print, paper and mail industry, charity, trade unions and community groups, argues that vulnerable Australians are impacted the most by paper fees, those on the wrong side of the digital divide. The latest data from the ABS shows that since 2014-2015 the digital divide hasn't narrowed and currently, close to 1.3 million Australian households are still not connected to the internet. Data shows that disadvantaged Australians are more likely to be digitally excluded: elderly, low-income households, people living with a disability, and people living in remote communities.

"The Royal Commission into Banking and Financial Services is demonstrating daily the need for strong consumer protections for Australians in this regard," furthered Northwood. "We believe the role of the Minister for Consumer Affairs is to protect consumers against unfair fees, not assist corporates in their marketing campaigns for their digital tools."

Paper fees have been implemented in the banking sector by some of the major providers such as Commonwealth Bank, Bankwest or Macquarie Bank. Ranging between \$1.25 and \$2.50 for a paper statement, fees can ramp up to \$7.50 for a paper copy of a statement requested at a bank's branch as seen recently with Westpac. Other providers such as NAB have automatically switched their customers to digital communications without requesting proper consent.

Over the last two years, Keep Me Posted has distributed thousands of template letters to help consumers request an exemption of paper fees as many are unaware of their rights. More concerning however, is many report struggling to argue their case to their service providers. The newly launched education campaign was expected to assist them, however, Keep Me Posted argues the campaign falls well short and does not support the spirit of the Consumer Affairs Forum agreement.

Keep Me Posted

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"Treasury's consultation paper into paper billing fees recognised that 'consumers from disadvantaged groups who cannot transition to digital bills are being disproportionately impacted by fees for paper billing'," said Northwood. "Twenty-eight (28) out of forty-three (43) organisations that publically contributed to Treasury's consultation supported a total ban on paper fees. This is a strong response that consumers shouldn't have to pay the price of corporates trying to cut their costs by any means. We are looking forward to seeing Treasury's recommendations on the issue and hope to see Australia joining the list of many other countries that have already legislated in this regard and provided consumer protections."

Globally, Austria, Belgium, France, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Spain, and the US State of Pennsylvania have already legislated that print and postage are a cost of doing business that must not be passed onto customers. Keep Me Posted hopes Australia is next.

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Keep Me Posted:

Keep Me Posted AU (KMP) is a national advocacy campaign run by TSA limited, a not-for-profit industry organisation, and is a partnership of advocate groups, charities, consumer groups, employer and employee representatives of the paper, print and mail industry, and local and federal representatives. KMP believes every consumer should be able to choose, without penalty, how they prefer to be communicated to via banks, utility companies and other services providers.

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