

# Customer Service During Times of High Pressure

**Good Practice Guidance | 2022**



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# Executive Summary

Energy companies are under several statutory obligations to ensure that customers are treated fairly when it comes to how they handle complaints, support people in debt and so on. The basis of these obligations is Ofgem's Standards of Conduct, also known as SLC 0, which form the foundations of the gas and electricity supply licenses. They are enforceable broad principle-based rules that highlight the fundamental expectations of how energy suppliers (and their representatives) ensure that each customer is treated fairly.

The collapse of 30 companies since August 2021, continued high and volatile global gas prices and concerns about customer affordability have put the energy industry under increasing pressure to demonstrate that it is living up to these standards, managing call waiting times and providing good customer service.

In the spring of 2020, at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, Energy UK worked rapidly and closely with Government and consumer groups to agree on several emergency measures to protect the domestic energy supply of those most in need during the disruption caused by the pandemic. We also developed, alongside Ofgem, a set of winter commitments to offer extra protection to consumers during winter 2021/22.

The global gas price crisis heralds another period of disruption and uncertainty. It is vital that energy companies can continue to innovate and support their customers. Energy UK asked retail supplier members for good practice examples in May 2022, from their response to the pandemic, followed by a roundtable in July to share learnings and good practices of customer service during times of high pressure.

We worked with Ofgem and Citizens Advice to explore the themes in more detail and are grateful to UK Finance and its members who shared information and insights from customer service in financial markets.

**This report is a summary of what we've learnt through this process. It is intended to promote good customer service practices. Whilst sharing these ideas is valuable, one size does not fit all and tailored approaches are becoming ever more necessary.**



# Obligation considerations

**At the July roundtable, Energy UK retail supplier members, Ofgem, Citizens Advice and members from UK Finance discussed the expectations of suppliers and the importance of customer service, and how the finance industry adapted its customer service during times of high pressure.**

Ofgem reminded us of supplier duties when it comes to behaviours, the provision of information to consumers, processes that must be followed, and considerations of consumers in vulnerable circumstances. These all point towards its objective of “suppliers, and their representatives, treat each customer fairly” and as we mentioned before, the Standards of Conduct. Citizens Advice spoke of how they built upon these obligations in their 2021 guide on [“How energy companies can support people who are struggling this winter”](#). Given the ongoing crisis, this guide is still of much use for suppliers and echoes the pressures that are still present.

Complaint Handling Regulations were discussed, and how the current, most common prompt for customers to contact their supplier is because of receiving a bill. Proactively engaging with consumers can help avoid bill shock and improve their customer experience journey. Ofgem explained how its Consumer Vulnerability Strategy 2025 sets out to improve targeted services, tailored to consumer needs. This was highlighted throughout our conversations, along with a focus on identifying those who are in vulnerable circumstances and are eligible for the Priority Service Register (PSR).

Ofgem recognised that more people than ever will be experiencing financial difficulty this winter, given the global gas price crisis, placing more pressure on energy suppliers. However, the regulator also emphasised a number of ways that companies can ensure customers have a positive experience, including:

- **Encourage communication with customers about their ability to pay, payment options and affordability**
- **Accurate billing, to avoid shock bills, confusion and distress**
- **Easily accessible, multichannel contact routes**
- **Proactive processes for identifying vulnerability**
- **Ensuring Pre Payment Meter (PPM) options are safe and reasonably practicable**
- **Prioritise resolving billing disputes and complaints**
- **Ensure relevant and accurate signposting or referrals to extra help and support, including from debt advice charities and other third sector organisations**
- **Ensure ongoing staff training and monitoring of vulnerability**

# Emerging Themes

Notable customer service practices

**Energy UK has identified a number of themes from the information suppliers shared with us in response to a request for information and during discussions at the roundtable.**

## 1 Empower the consumer

Creating systems that allow customers to self-serve where appropriate is widely agreed to be an important way of improving customer service. This can include giving people the option to self-serve and add meter reads to their accounts or, as SO Energy offer, sign-up to the PSR during an energy switch application. This can reduce the 'hassle factor' and also free up phone lines for emergencies or customers in vulnerable circumstances.

## 2 Offer multiple ways for people to get in touch

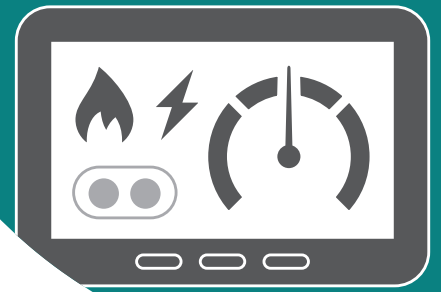
Technology has dramatically improved the ways people can engage companies, and this can transform the relationship people have with their energy supplier. For example, some people might like to receive a letter in the post, others an email and others web chat or SMS service that they can use outside of normal working hours. Ecotricity saw a huge shift in demand in its App uptake, with contact doubling from March 2019 to March 2020. With more issues arising around energy accounts, we urge the use of a variety of robust contact methods where possible, and a freephone number is highly encouraged.

## 3 Ensure information is up-to-date

With more people questioning and being concerned about how much energy they use and what it costs, it's more important than ever to ensure that information on websites is kept up to date, whether this is on a blog page, an FAQ section or an email template. SSE put efforts into ensuring their website was up-to-date with relevant messaging. As a result of this, they saw call waittimes and volumes reduce, demonstrating that clear and concise updates really can improve customer experiences.

## 4 Resourcing and recruitment

Many suppliers turned their attention to resourcing and recruitment, ensuring they have more of the right people for the job, to allow the ever-growing concerns from consumers to be responded to as quickly as possible. Cross-skilling was seen to be impactful by Centrica, allowing them to continue to provide a good service and meet the increasing and varied demands from customers.



## Vulnerability issues

**We also asked our retail members for information about how they best ensure people in vulnerable circumstances get the help and support they need when they interact with their energy suppliers. Energy UK members referenced our Vulnerability Commitment, an agreement open to energy suppliers to continuously improve the quality of support they provide, which covers over 70% of the domestic market.**

### 1 Send pre-loaded Pre-Payment Meter (PPM) keys and cards

Covid-19 saw many people in need of additional support credit for their PPM and often could not safely get to a shop to pick these up or even top up their key/card. Suppliers would often send a pre-loaded key/card directly to customers' homes. This is a good practice way of ensuring customers stay on supply, reducing worry for them and getting credit to them safely.

### 2 Promote smart meters

Switching from a traditional PPM to a smart meter can often create a better experience for customers, Ovo Energy promoted smart meters to their pre-payment customers throughout Covid-19. This can allow for easier top-ups and budgeting, better visibility of usage and makes it easier to detect self-disconnection.

### 3 Have open discussions

It is paramount that consumers in vulnerable circumstances have access to open discussions with their energy suppliers. It is good practice to talk openly about flexible payment plans, allow agents to spend more time with these customers, and be able to provide follow-ups or calls backs in an alternative language for them. Practices like these show suppliers going the extra mile for their customers. ScottishPower created a specialised team to do just this, their Affordability Team, paired with a sophisticated telephony system, allowed agents to explore issues and options with customers facing financial difficulties.

### 4 Be proactive

Some of our members reach out to consumers who have been identified as self-disconnected, or at risk of this. It is good practice to be proactive, to check if customers are safe, or if they need more support, and to discuss the available options. Octopus Energy launched an electric blanket scheme, giving away 7,000 blankets to those that needed them most, following a financial assessment. They analysed data on energy bills and found that these customers reduced their bills by 19% with the blankets.



## Looking after staff

**Lastly, we asked for information about the many ways suppliers ensure their staff are well looked after and how they best prepare and support staff who have difficult and stressful conversations with customers. There has been an increase in these types of conversations because of the financial pressure and emotional strain customers experience as a result of the cost-of-living crisis.**

### 1 Equip your staff

From working from home to the new and more popular hybrid working models it's important for staff to have an appropriate space to work in. There's a lot of value in making sure they have good internet access and have access to what they need in order to work to their best abilities, this was found to be one of the first things suppliers did when staff started working from home.

### 2 Train and re-train

Give time to reflect on your colleague's good work, and equally, make time to learn from errors made to increase staff agility. It's also valuable to create dedicated teams that are experts. EDF designed a range of specific training interventions to prepare staff for the harsh reality of Covid-19 and the energy crisis. These have ranged from 'Covid-19-Direct Debit' to 'Price Cap' sessions.

### 3 Reflect on mental well-being

With many more organisations working from home or having a hybrid setup, it is more important now than ever to check in on employees' mental health. BES Utilities held online buzz sessions to try and include everyone and reassure staff that they are not alone during these tough times. Lots of energy suppliers shared information about the importance of encouraging the uptake of physical and mental health activities, making time to motivate staff and maintain close work relationships because it made such an impact on morale.

### 4 Brief your staff

Several Energy UK members hold briefings and gatherings for their staff to ensure they are kept up to speed with the energy industry's ever-changing operating environment. Members found that when staff are well briefed, they can provide more detailed and clearer answers, which positively impacts consumer journeys.



## Roundtable Reflections

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At the July roundtable Citizens Advice reiterated the importance of a positive customer journey and how small adjustments to processes from suppliers can make big impacts on the people they serve. The consumer advocate also spoke of the importance of understanding the drivers behind customer contact. This became a common talking point later on in the roundtable, and there was a general consensus around the table about the value of aligned industry communications during winter 2022. As a result, Energy UK worked with Ofgem, Department for BEIS and Citizens Advice to produce an aligned Q&A for frontline staff, answering common questions and signalling where consumers can find additional support. A poignant note from this presentation also was to continue re-iterating the support that is available to consumers for winter, not least because there will be so many more customers that need to seek this support that has not done so before.

UK Finance shared information about how financial service providers have adapted and strengthened customer support over the years. This brought to the table the importance of empowering staff as well as customers. By having flexible and multiskilled staff the finance industry was able to move at a suitable pace when there was a much higher demand for services due to Covid-19. They found that by sending out key messages, the operational admin was reduced meaning agents could commit more time to those who needed it.

It is essential to note that energy companies do not underestimate the scale of the challenge facing the industry this winter. It will be crucial to ensure recruitment and retention are a focus over the coming months. Energy UK members shared how they are doing this, with examples of how companies seek to ensure their staff are valued, welcoming their contributions and helping teams to grow culturally. All of the roundtable attendees emphasised that energy is an essential service and that their staff understand how important it is for their customers to be supported.

## Looking ahead

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The cost-of-living crisis is placing a strain on most households in the country and is set to continue into 2023. Energy UK knows it is vital that the industry makes time to reflect on customer service practices and create spaces such as roundtables and workshops to share ideas, and discuss learnings from each other, including those from other industries.

**Energy UK will continue to work with its members, the regulator and the consumer body to ensure that good practice on customer service is shared widely.**





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The voice of the energy industry