

Covid-19 Good practice guide for Energy Suppliers

The impact of Covid-19 on the energy market is unknown, however we would advise suppliers to ensure they are well prepared. In this document we've identified some risks to consider, and some examples of good practice. This guide is designed to build upon the principles agreed by industry and developed collaboratively by BEIS, Ofgem, Energy UK and Citizens Advice.

As this is a fluid situation, suppliers should ensure they are up to date with the latest government and regulator guidance, and satisfy themselves they remain compliant with their obligations under the supply licence.

We would also request that if a supplier is experiencing performance or operational challenges, they ensure their Citizens Advice consumer service RAST protocols are up to date, and inform their EHU contact.

Identifying and supporting customers

There are particular customer characteristics who may be at greater risk of experiencing problems with their energy supply during the outbreak. These include:

- having a prepayment meter (particularly non-smart prepay)
- needing to self-isolate¹ or practice stringent social distancing²
- not having a good network of friends, relatives or neighbours to help them top up or buy food and essentials
- having health conditions meaning they need to maintain a constant supply of electricity, or are vulnerable to a cold home.

For customers in these situations, suppliers might consider - with regard to the balance between preparing customers but not scaring them:

- Offering to pause or reduce debt repayments if they experience a period of financial distress, in line with existing requirements to ensure instalments are calculated so consumers are able to pay.
- Proactively contacting prepayment customers with guidance on what to do in case of self-isolation or stringent social distancing. This may include

¹<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance>

²<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people/guidance-on-social-distancing-for-everyone-in-the-uk-and-protecting-older-people-and-vulnerable-adults>

asking them to check if they have a friend, relative or neighbour who can help them top up (while maintaining isolation or social distancing) and if they can top up a little more each time in case they need to self-isolate, or asking customers to keep outside meter boxes unlocked (if it's safe and practical to do so)

- For any consumers who mention that they are self-isolating or social distancing (for example working from home), warning them that their energy usage may change if they are at home all day and should try to prepare for a possible increase in bills.

For smart prepay customers this could also include;

- Providing discretionary credit on their prepayment meter. Consumers should be made aware this will need to be paid back.
- Switching their prepayment meter into credit mode. Consumers should be made aware this will need to be paid back and existing credit will be refunded.

For legacy prepay customers this could also include:

- Enabling a customer to nominate a trusted third party to be able to pick up discretionary credit sent to a shop on their behalf. Consumers should be made aware this will need to be paid back.
- Sending out a pre-loaded top up card in emergencies (including financial emergencies).

There is a risk of people taking advantage of vulnerable consumers in this situation. We recommend suppliers use these interactions to identify vulnerability and eligibility for the Priority Services Register (PSR). Some PSR services may be particularly useful in these instances, including the password scheme for home visits.

Face to face interactions with customers

We expect that suppliers will need to consider their approach to face to face interactions with customers (for instance, meter readers, metering appointments, field sales, or debt site visits).

Suppliers should consider whether it remains appropriate to have field sales still active. There may be opportunities to redeploy staff to other customer service roles that do not involve face to face interaction with customers.

Some visits may remain necessary for safety reasons or to keep customers on supply. Customers who aren't in self-isolation may not want to let anyone into

their house, particularly if they are practising stringent social distancing. We would suggest suppliers:

- Allow customers to postpone or reschedule non-urgent appointments without any penalty (for instance, if they need to get a smart meter installed within 6 months for their tariff, this should be extended).
- Reassure customers about what precautions are being taken.
- Seek to understand the concerns of the customer, for instance if they are immunosuppressed or in a high-risk category. Suppliers should work with the customer to establish what precautions and action can be taken.
- Some customers in the higher risk groups may be uncomfortable with receiving any sort of visitor in their home, such as a meter reader. Suppliers should check with customers on the PSR, ahead of time, about whether they are able to receive visitors and/or establish if any precautions should be taken.

Microbusiness customers

We expect a significant number of microbusinesses to be negatively affected by a reduction in custom during the outbreak. This may cause financial strain on businesses, as well as extra stress for the consumer.

We would recommend suppliers with microbusiness customers to consider:

- Ensuring if the property is mixed-use (with domestic residency) the above points are taken into consideration
- Pausing, or reducing repayments
- Stopping planned disconnections
- Proactively contacting businesses to reassure there are options if they are in financial difficulty

These suggestions are in line with recently announced measures by banks to support households and businesses affected by the outbreak.³

Maintaining communication

It is important that suppliers keep open communications with their customer base. There may be a number of customers who are stressed by the situation, and require additional information or support. We recommend suppliers;

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-51817947>

- Plan for call centres to be able to maintain core functions in case they are affected. We would expect a phone line to be maintained for prepay customers who go off supply outside friendly credit hours.
- Keep updated information on their website (for example, in the form of an FAQ, or information box). Even if there is nothing to update, it can reassure customers the supplier is aware of the situation and it won't affect their energy supply.
- Ensure their staff are aware of and sensitive to the situations consumers may face due to the outbreak (for example, reduced income due to inability to work, having a prolonged hospital stay, or bereavement).