

Heat Network Industry Council statement: Monitoring



Context

In response to the exceptional circumstances caused by the coronavirus pandemic, members of the Heat Network Industry Council agreed and published in early May a statement setting out how companies will go above and beyond to support customers during this difficult time.

This is a voluntary agreement and the organisations who have signed up to this agreement do so for the heat networks where they have the authority to do so.

In all cases, the statement encourages heat network companies to work with customers and be responsive to their individual circumstances.

This qualitative statement is accompanied by a confidential quantitative submission by all companies on a quarterly basis. A summary of this quantitative submission is published in aggregate by Heat Trust.



Identifying and prioritising customers at risk

What the statement says

We will seek to identify and prioritise customers who may need additional support and consider the needs of customers taking into account that:

- Priority Service Register customers may need extra advice and support.

1. What we are doing: Engaging customers who may need to be added to the Priority Service Register [tick all that apply]

Staff are trained to identify those who may need to be added and proactively engage new and existing customers to check on any changed circumstances

Field staff are trained and are responding if they identify someone who may need to be added

Further information:

- We hold regular customer events, although no longer in person, these are currently being conducted via regular Zoom meetings where customers can virtually attend from the comfort of their home.
- Regular updated information and Welcome Pack is available on our website as well as on our printed literature posted out as part of the physical Welcome Pack.
- We also continue to carry out welcome calls to all new customers within the first few days of them signing up.

2. What we are doing: Providing additional advice and support to customers on the Priority Service Register [tick all that apply]

Providing communication support, including for information on coronavirus, such as providing information in different languages and ensuring all information is accessible

Providing additional support for those in vulnerable circumstances such as working with customers to nominate a bill payer, providing additional safety measures for calls to the house and signposting to impartial advice.

Further information:

- We offer translation services if required as most residents in our Borough have English as a second language. We also offer our Welcome Pack in Turkish as many of our customers' first language is Turkish. We've used a Turkish translator as part of our Zoom customer events. She's assisted with subtitles for our customer presentations as well as been available online during the events for the Q&A part of the sessions.

What the statement says

We will seek to identify and prioritise customers who may need additional support and consider the needs of customers taking into account that:

- Prepayment meter customers, both smart and legacy, will need specific support.



3. What we are doing: Providing specific support to prepayment customers [tick all that apply]

- Ensuring that customers on analogue prepayment meters have alternative means to top up if they cannot go to a local top-up point
- Providing access to additional emergency credit if needed

Further information:

- We offer multiple top-up methods including via our website, app, PayPoint and telephone. It is also possible for customers to set a regular auto top-up (weekly, monthly etc) or an auto top-up when their account reaches an agreed credit limit.
- All customers have an emergency £5 credit limit available on their accounts.
- We openly engage with our customers and encourage them to contact us if they are encountering any financial difficulty or change in their circumstances, so we can work with them to find a suitable solution.
- We regularly (this has moved from weekly to monthly outside the heat season) monitor any exceptions regarding high, low and no consumption as well as high, low and no credit so we can engage with customers whose habits may have changed, to ensure all is ok and everything is working as expected.

We will support customers who are impacted financially as a direct or indirect result of coronavirus

What the statement says

We will support customers who are impacted financially as a direct or indirect result of coronavirus. Based on individual circumstances, this could include:

- Considering reassessing or reducing debt repayment and bill payments for domestic customers in financial distress

4. What we are doing: Ensuring processes are in place to respond to customers' changing financial circumstances [tick all that apply]

- All repayment plans include an affordability assessment
- Regularly engaging with customers to respond to changing circumstances
- Providing a range of repayment plans or tailoring default repayment plans to customers' individual circumstances

Further information

- We automatically direct customers experiencing financial difficulty to the relevant support agencies who may be able to assist them further.

What the statement says

We will support customers who are impacted financially as a direct or indirect result of coronavirus. Based on individual circumstances, this could include:

- Considering referring customers who are struggling to pay to third party debt advisers such as StepChange and Citizens Advice.



5. What we are doing: Referring customers to third party advisers if needed [tick all that apply]

- Proactively making referrals to organisations such as StepChange and Citizens Advice

Further information:

- We automatically direct customers to third party advisers who may be able to assist them further as part of our BAU in supporting those experiencing financial difficulty.

We will support prepayment meter customers directly or indirectly impacted by coronavirus to stay on supply

What the statement says

We will support prepayment meter customers directly or indirectly impacted by coronavirus to stay on supply. We will promote online and/or telephone smart prepayment top-up channels, where available. Where this is not available, based on individual circumstances, this could include:

- Enabling customers to nominate a trusted third party to be able to pick up discretionary credit sent to a shop on their behalf

6. What we are doing: Enabling customers to nominate a trusted third party if needed [tick all that apply]

- Proactively ensuring customers can nominate a trusted third party to pick up credit

Further information:

- We proactively encourage those customers on our PSR to nominate a trusted third party to liaise with us on their behalf, for all aspects of their account management.
- Customers also have the option to request a password in order to better protect themselves.
- Where we have identified customers who may have regular ongoing issues with their account (difficulty understanding the system, topping up etc.), we have proactively encouraged these customers to nominate a trusted third party to liaise with us on their behalf, for all aspects of their account management.

What the statement says

We will support prepayment meter customers directly or indirectly impacted by coronavirus to stay on supply. We will promote online and/or telephone smart prepayment top-up channels, where available. Where this is not available, based on individual circumstances, this could include:

- Having particular regard for the regulatory requirements and the potential impact of coronavirus, when applying the 'safe and reasonable' test when considering switching a customer from credit to prepay



7. What we are doing: Having regard to how the ‘safe and reasonable test’ should be considered within the context of coronavirus [tick all that apply]

Reflecting the impact of coronavirus on our assessment of, for example, customers’ ability to understand and operate prepayment meters and visit top-up points where needed, whether customers require a continuous supply for health reasons and whether customers have continuous access to the prepayment meter

Further information:

- All our customers are on PAYG and have continuous access to their smart meter to review their credit status, consumption etc. They are then able to top-up via their online account, app, telephone or at a PayPoint.
- Relevant guides and instruction manuals are in each property and provided as part of the Welcome Pack customers receive upon moving in. If they continue to have any difficulties, we encourage them to call us for any additional support.
- At our regular (now virtual) customer events, we enjoy showing customers the smart meters, how they work and how they can get the most out of their new heating system.
- We have helped many customers understand and accept new ways to top-up during the pandemic. This includes via our automated telephone top-up service where we can input their account number for them before transferring them to securely enter their payment details.
- We’ve also created a step-by-step guide with pictures to help our customers set up an online account in order to manage their account. With the online account, they can set up regular or auto top-ups to suit their needs and finances.
- In some instances, where our engineers have attended for a no heat call out, they’ve found it’s due to not knowing how to work the programmer and have taken the time to show our customers how to use their system.

Providing information

What the statement says

We will make available information, advice and guidance to customers on what help is available, including that the energy usage of self-isolating customers may go up as a result of being at home more, and sign posting to sources of support.

This will include several different communication channels such as a supplier’s website, a contact phone number for customers etc; recognising that not all customers will have internet access.



8. What we are doing: Using different communication channels for information, advice and guidance
[tick all that apply]

- Paper-based; including, for example, on people's bills and letters
- Providing a contact phone number for customers
- Providing online support and guidance

Further information:

- This is included on our paper based annual statements that go out to customers.
- Our contact phone number is on all our heat agreements with the customer as well as literature located in the property. There is also a sticker located on each customer's heat interface unit (HIU) containing contact details, as well as contact details on our website.
- Customers can access FAQs as well as useful videos on our website. They also have the option to email us with any queries they may have should they not wish to call.
- We may consider sending a message to the smart meter (customer interface unit – CIU) in the coming months to acknowledge the same.

