

Heat network companies: Agreement on consumer protection in response to the impact of Covid

This agreement, to protect consumers during the disruption caused by Covid, has been signed by the organisations listed on the ADE's website.

Where a consumer has signed a Heat Supply Agreement or Residential Supply Agreement with a supplier named above, and where the supplier named above is not acting as an Agent for a Third Party Provider, they will be covered by this statement.

The organisations who have signed up to this agreement do so for the heat networks where they have the authority to do so; for example, by reviewing payment plans and putting in place the other forms of support as set out below. Different heat networks are operated in different ways. It may not always be the case that the heat network operator has the authority to put in place these forms of support; for example, where the heat network company is acting on behalf of a Local Authority, Housing Association or leasehold/freehold company. Where this is the case, the signatories will encourage their partners to support these commitments.

In all cases, the signatories to this agreement will ensure that all customers on their heat networks can contact their customer service helpline to be signposted to the relevant authority, get advice and information and understand whether their heat network is part of this agreement.

We understand that any disruption to people's supply of heating and hot water at this time will have a significant impact. We want to reassure consumers that repairs to outages will be prioritised.

Companies signed up to this agreement commit to working constructively to ensure these commitments are delivered, including for example by providing relevant information in an appropriate way, with consumer bodies or other relevant organisations. In the first instance and where possible, this will be part of existing customer protection frameworks.

Where this is not possible, companies signed up to this agreement will work with consumer bodies or other relevant organisations to agree in the next 2-3 months an appropriate process to monitor delivery of these commitments.

Identifying and prioritising customers at risk¹.

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

- Any customer can suddenly become vulnerable even if they are not classed as such already. We further recognise that the impact of Covid will put people into vulnerable circumstances who would not have otherwise been vulnerable.
- Priority Service Register customers may need extra advice and support.
- Prepayment meter customers, both smart and legacy, will need specific support.
- Customers with health conditions or who are or are vulnerable to a cold home may need to maintain a constant supply of heating and hot water.

¹ Customers pay for their heating and hot water from a heat network in different ways; including those using prepayment meters, as part of rental fees or through direct debit. This agreement covers all heat network customers of a heat network, regardless of payment method.

We will support customers who are impacted financially as a direct or indirect result of COVID-19.

Based on individual circumstances, this could include:

- Considering reassessing or reducing debt repayment and bill payments for domestic customers in financial distress.
- Considering referring customers who are struggling to pay to third party debt advisers such as StepChange and Citizens Advice.
- Suspending credit meter disconnections.²

We will support prepayment meter customers directly or indirectly impacted by COVID-19 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:

- Extending discretionary / friendly credit or sending out a pre-loaded top up card;
- Enabling customers to nominate a trusted third party to be able to pick up discretionary credit sent to a shop on their behalf.
- Switching smart prepayment meters into credit mode or extending non-disconnection periods (customers will be made aware any credit will need to be paid back).
- Having particular regard for the regulatory requirements and the potential impact of COVID-19, when applying the 'safe and reasonably practicable' test when considering switching a customer from credit to prepay³.
- Proactively contacting prepayment meter customers with guidance on what to do in case of self-isolation or shielding.

Providing information.

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.

² Except in cases of safety, theft and vacant properties

³ Whilst recognising that most heat network customers will have smart prepayment meters, this should consider the [amended Safe and Reasonably Practical guidance](#) issued by Ofgem to the regulated gas and electricity market which includes, specifically, whether the customer is able to understand and operate the prepayment meter and visit top-up points where needed; whether the customer lives quite a distance from top-up outlets; whether the customer requires a continuous supply for health reasons; whether the prepayment meter is located in a position that means the customer cannot operate it; whether the prepayment meter is located in a place to which the customer does not have continuous access to; any advice/guidance received from the Health and Safety Executive