

Heat Network Industry Council statement: Monitoring

Context

In response to the exceptional circumstances caused by the Covid 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 to Heat Trust. A summary of this quantitative submission is published in aggregate here.



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.



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 keep a Priority Service Register which outlines the specific needs of each vulnerable customer.

This is completed initially in conjunction with our client as we accept that it is fluid and can change.

The register is linked to our Operations, Billing and Plant systems and it records the nature of the vulnerability. The information is stored securely and in line with the GDPR.

There is a wide range of issues that can lead to vulnerability, including physical disabilities, financial problems, language difficulties or age. We do not seek to define these in a rigid way, rather we seek to understand the customers' needs so that we can provide them with the extra support they need.

In addition we send a Welcome Pack to all new customers, within which we offer 'An extra helping hand'. We invite them to get in touch, by writing, telephone or email, to tell us about any special circumstances. These individual requirements will then be flagged up and considered whenever we interact with that customer.

There may be times when we detect a vulnerability that we have not been informed about. Our customer relations advisors and field based staff are trained to listen out for triggers when they are speaking to customers on the phone or when visiting a property in person. This could be something like; "I've got a broken leg" or "I have three young children in the house". In these instances, our advisors thank them for mentioning their special circumstances and ask if they would like us to make a note on their account. We respect their wishes and only record information with their full permission.

When setting up the details of a customer's vulnerable situation, a review date is entered to ensure that they are regularly monitored. Vulnerable situations that are short term like the example mentioned above will have relevant review date entered; however longer-term Vulnerable situations are reviewed on a 6-monthly basis.

[To complete to provide further narrative, alternative approaches, best practice – how practices have changed/are robust to the potential additional challenges of Covid]



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 Covid, 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:

Information on government guidance and our approach to safeguarding customers and engineers, has been issued to customers in multiple formats to make sure that information has been available to everyone, irrespective of their individual needs. We also refer customers to the NHS website so that customers can keep up to date on the latest advice and where possible include the link to the NHS website.

The formats used to communicate the message to our customers are:

- Messages to all Smart PAYG units
- Letters for customers where paper is their preferred correspondence format and Legacy PAYG customers
- E-mails to customers where email is their preferred correspondence format
- Messages on the Bills
- Our website was continually updated in line with government guidance
- Automated message on Customer Service phone line

All calls all go through a diagnostics process, where every attempt is made to try and resolve the problem for the customer over the phone and avoid an engineer appointment wherever possible. This is standard practice but became essential for the safeguarding of customers and engineers during the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring that engineers were only visiting a customer's property if absolutely necessary.

Additional safety measures are in place, should an engineer need to attend a customers property. Customers are required to confirm whether anyone in their household is currently self-isolating. If they are, this is included on the job details for the engineer and ensures that they are aware before arriving at the property.

Upon attending the customers property, the engineers will explain to the customer that they will need to avoid the area of the house that the engineer is working in, to help minimise risk to both parties.

[To complete to provide further narrative, alternative approaches, best practice – how practices have changed/are robust to the potential additional challenges of Covid]



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.

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 where needed
- ✓ Postponing recovery of outstanding prepayment debts allowing customers to benefit from their full top up rather than paying towards historic balances

Further information:

We understand that customers could be affected by Covid in many ways, this could be directly as a result of contracting the virus or having to self isolate or indirectly as a result of the closure of payment outlets or loss of income from employment.

Our revised processes have taken into account many of the challenges that our customers could face during this difficult time.

Legacy prepayment customers were all provided with payment cards preloaded with credit. These cards were delivered to Legacy prepayment customers by our engineers and in some cases by our Clients. Additional preloaded cards were also left with our Clients ready for them to hand deliver, should a customer be in need of one.

Customers with a Smart PAYG unit all had a message sent to their PAYG units to advise them that if they were struggling to top-up, they should contact us. Our Customer Service team would then review each customer's situation on a case by case basis & extended the emergency credit limit if that was the only way to ensure that the customer still had access to their supplies.

Alternatively, we would recommend alternative payment methods available to the customer, such as the payment line and setting up an automated or regular top-up.

Any new Smart PAYG customers that were registered with us following COVID-19 lockdown, were issued with an amended welcome letter, which advises the customers that the letter can be used as a means to top up in place of a physical card – they were also provided with all other reference numbers to enable them to top-up online or over the phone.

[To complete to provide further narrative, alternative approaches, best practice – how practices have changed/are robust to the potential additional challenges of Covid]



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

What the statement says

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

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:

Our standard process for setting up a payment plan involves us assessing each customer's current financial situation and constraints, to ensure that the payment plan is suitable for them, whilst also ensuring that their debt doesn't increase further.

Payment plans are always regularly monitored and if a customer isn't making the agreed payments, we contact them to try and establish the reason. The best approach for each customer would then be assessed on a case by case basis.

This is standard practice for us; however due to the COVID-19 pandemic we also offered additional advice for customers that were unable to make payment, such as customers that didn't have access to a bank account and would generally make payments using cash at a PayPoint outlet. The agreement in those cases would be for us to contact them regularly and reassess their situation and the government guidance at that time.

Initially we stopped sending out reminder letters to help reduce stress for customers. Once lockdown restrictions were lifted and businesses started reopening, the decision was made to recommence sending reminder letters, with the exclusion of any mention of disconnection.

As standard our reminder letters advise customers struggling to pay, to contact us to discuss payment plans. The letters also suggest setting up an online account to help them manage their account and list the priority services available to them if they register with us for these services.

We have also postponed deductions from customers' accounts which were in place to recover outstanding balances. This means residents were able to benefit from their entire top up without a percentage being deducted for debt effectively putting the debt on hold.

We have also moved live debt from customers prepayment units to allow access to supplies.

In each case we have advised customers the implications of extending the emergency credit and postponing the deductions and how any balances will be recovered later. Our objective is to ensure residents have access to heat and hot water but also that they are aware of when and how the funds will be collected when the time comes.



What the statement says

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

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:

Switch2 will always try to resolve the customers payment issues whether that is a short or long term problem directly with the customer and our clients.

Where we are unable resolve issues directly with customers we will refer them to an independent third party agency.

Our standard procedure, when a customer advises us that they are experiencing financial difficulties, is to refer them on to independent advice organisations, who are better placed to offer financial advice and support.

Our reminder letters also provide customers with the names and contact details for multiple independent advice organisations, such as:

- Citizens Advice
- Debt Advice Foundation
- National Debtline
- PayPlan
- StepChange Charity

Reminder letters are always sent to the customer using their preferred correspondence method.

[To complete to provide further narrative, alternative approaches, best practice – how practices have changed/are robust to the potential additional challenges of Covid]



We will support prepayment meter customers directly or indirectly impacted by Covid-19 to stay on supply

What the statement says

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:

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

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:

If a legacy prepayment customer was unable to attend the point of sale themselves there are two approaches, we can take depending on the type of Legacy prepayment unit they had:

1. Clients have been sent a batch of pre-loaded cards and we notify the Client of any customers that need one. The Client then delivers the card to the customers property.
2. We send out an engineer to the point of sale and they apply a loan to a prepayment card. The card is then either collected by a third party on the customer behalf from the point of sale or delivered to the property by the engineer.

Customers that have a Smart PAYG unit can top-up using various methods, none of which require a third party to collect them. However, they could ask a third party to make or set up the payment on their behalf. Payment methods available to these customers are outlined in their welcome pack as well as on our website. The top-up options available to them are:

1. Payment line, which is active 24/7 365days
2. Switch2 App
3. My.switch2.co.uk – Customers can sign up to an online account and arrange for regular top ups to be taken based on their desired frequency and amount. They can also set up auto top-ups, for a specific amount when the balance on their PAYG unit reaches a certain level. One-off payment can also be made

[To complete to provide further narrative, alternative approaches, best practice – how practices have changed/are robust to the potential additional challenges of Covid]



What the statement says

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:

- Having particular regard for the regulatory requirements and the potential impact of Covid-19, when applying the 'safe and reasonable' test when considering switching a customer from credit to prepay

What we are doing: Having regard to how the 'safe and reasonable test' should be considered within the context of Covid [tick all that apply]

- ✓ Reflecting the impact of Covid 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:

Customers who have a Smart PAYG unit, can be changed from Prepayment to Credit Billing if this is an appropriate course of action and is agreed upon with our client. Taking this action would ensure that their supplies will always remain active.

The decision to do this, would be made on a case by case basis depending on the customers individual circumstances, so that we can ensure the customer is not at risk of a loss of supply.

The key things that would be considered are:

- Is the customer in a vulnerable situation and could their health could be affected by the loss of supply – if there isn't one registered then we would discuss this with the customer to establish whether there is a risk that just hasn't been registered with us yet.
- Whether the customer is able to understand telephone or written instructions provided by us on how to top-up or use their PAYG unit.

On a case by case basis we would also assess customers who may be better off moving from Billing to Prepayment. This would be a good option for a customer that is struggling to settle their bills each month and cover an overdue balance, as we would simply deduct a percentage of each top-up, as and when they are made by the customer.

To complete to provide further narrative, alternative approaches, best practice – how practices have changed/are robust to the potential additional challenges of Covid]



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.

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:

Our standard welcome packs provide our contact details and advise customers to contact us if they are in need of additional support, whether it is for financial reasons, due to a vulnerable situation or they are experiencing problems with their supplies.

We ceased issuing reminder letters initially, to minimise further distress to our customers during an already very distressing time. Once we re-commenced sending out letters, we made the decision to remove all mention of disconnection. This was the only change that we made to our standard letters, as the existing template contains all our contact details and recommends that customers make contact with us if they are experiencing difficulty paying.

Messages were applied to our bills prior to us leaving the office, which guided customers to our website for updates following recent Government Guidance. Customers were also advised, should they experience a fault that required an engineer, to let us know if they were self-isolating prior to us attending.

Auto-response e-mails have been updated to include information on where customers can obtain the latest COVID-19 advice, including a link to the site. Customers are also informed that they should inform us if they are self-isolating and advises them that our engineers have been briefed on best practice hygiene factors and will work with them to ensure that they are minimising any risk to them or the engineer during our visit to the property.

Our website has been continually updated following Government guidance, to advise customers on what services have been available and any restrictions we have had to put in place. There is also guidance offered to both Billing and Prepayment customers on what to do if they are struggling to pay or have a need for us to attend their property.

[To complete to provide further narrative, alternative approaches, best practice – how practices have changed/are robust to the potential additional challenges of Covid]

