

Cut Off: Problems and best-practices in energy company communications in Lancaster

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Executive Summary

As energy bills rise dramatically due to the effects of global instability, it is critical that support be easily available for people struggling to pay. Unfortunately, the experience of contacting energy providers for help is currently defined by overlong calls, stories repeated to multiple agents, and a lack of dialogue between providers and advice workers. This report lays out the difficulties we are seeing at Citizens Advice North Lancashire,¹ and calls for energy companies to adopt industry best practices: an adviser-only phone line to allow easier contact between advisers and trained agents, and acceptance of advisers' forms of authority to speed up communication.

Outlining the Problems

National Context

Currently, communication with and from energy companies is difficult for many. Research conducted by *Which* in 2022 and 2023 found that two in five energy consumers find their bills confusing, and a majority of the population supports the inclusion of a contact email address and/or telephone number on bills.²

This issue becomes compounded when people in crisis try to get in touch with energy companies about their advice needs. These people often need urgent support, and may be unable to handle their cases themselves, but many of the practices of energy companies make it difficult or impossible either for them or advisers supporting them to make contact.

A report by the Committee for Public Accounts has found that regulators don't do enough to support customers in this situation, often requiring them to be 'willing and able to repeat personal information to multiple companies'; that support

¹ The Energy Matters project spans Citizens Advice North Lancashire and Citizens Advice Preston; however, the project has been running for longer in the North Lancashire area, and so this was where the advisers had time and data to support the research.

² [Jooshandeh, J. \(2023\) Energy bills transparency: Our research looking into consumers' understanding of energy bills. Which?](#)

received is inconsistent between customers in similar circumstances; and that customers on the Priority Services Register often aren't informed of what support this will afford them. Of particular note to us, the Committee found that 'Customers are fearful about bringing their financial situation to their service providers' attention, and consumers often have to tell multiple companies, and even multiple people and teams within the same company, of their circumstances, which adds to their distress ... It is only very recently that the regulators have taken enforcement action against, or issued penalties to companies for, poor communication with customers.'³

Consumer rights activist Martin Lewis suggested to the committee 'that companies should approach communication with customers about the support that is available to them in the same way they communicate in selling their services', rather than putting information on bills which many already find too complicated to fully read. Both he and Citizens Advice expressed concerns about increasing digitisation of services, and the use of AI chatbots which can produce loops where it's not possible for consumers to get through to ask for help.'⁴

In the release of their recent Star Rating for customer service quality in the energy sector, our parent charity Citizens Advice noted that 'while energy supplier customer service is slowly improving, suppliers must go further to support households ahead of a challenging winter - especially companies lagging behind.' They pointed out that research released in August shows that 37% of households are worried about paying their bills this winter, and so effective support is necessary.'⁵

This report, which deals with issues we see at Citizens Advice North Lancashire, should be read in the context of these national developments.

³ [Committee of Public Accounts \(2026\) Regulation of water, energy and broadband: Thirteenth Report of Session 2026–27, HC 105. House of Commons, pgs. 2-6, 12-14.](#)

⁴ Ibid, pgs. 13-4.

⁵ [Citizens Advice Media Centre \(24th September 2026\) 'Energy suppliers must double down on customer service ahead of challenging winter, says Citizens Advice'. Citizens Advice.](#)

The Companies

UK electricity is provided by a number of companies. The largest of these, sometimes called the 'Big Six', are Octopus Energy, British Gas, E.On Next, OVO Energy, EDF Energy, and ScottishPower, in that order.⁶ At Citizens Advice North Lancashire, our advisers haven't regularly encountered clients on ScottishPower, but do regularly deal with Utility Warehouse and Utilita, which are smaller suppliers.

So, how do these companies compare in terms of communication with clients and advisers? We talked to our advisers, who regularly help clients deal with these companies, and their experiences are summarised in the following table:

	Adviser-only line?	Accept Form of Authority?	Complaints per 100,000 accounts nationally, 2025-6 ⁷	Additional communication issues reported?
British Gas	Yes	Yes	4,462	No
EDF Energy	Yes	Yes	4,230	No
<u>E.On</u> Next	No	Yes	3,212	No
Octopus	No	Yes	2,069	No
OVO	No	No	6,634	Yes
Utilita	No	Yes	4,652	No
Utility Warehouse	No	No	7,623	Yes

⁶ As of September 2026. The term 'Big Six' has been used since the end of privatisation in the 2000s, but the companies it refers to have changed due to acquisitions and the growth of Octopus Energy as a new supplier. For gas and electricity market shares, see [Ofgem \(July 2026\) 'Electricity Supply Market Shares by Company: Domestic \(GB\)'](#) and ['Gas Supply Market Shares by Company: Domestic \(GB\)'. Ofgem.](#)

⁷ Based on the sum of quarterly data for Q3 2025-Q2 2026 from Ofgem (August 2026) 'Complaints Received by Large Suppliers per 100,000 Customer Accounts' and 'Complaints Received by Medium Suppliers per 100,000 Customer Accounts.'

Note that the information in this chart is based on our energy advisers' experiences, and does not necessarily reflect new practices adopted by these companies. In some cases, issues may be dependent on the specific cases we have come into contact with. In our discussions, advisers noted that their experiences and those of their clients can vary widely depending on the support worker they speak to.

[This table should be read alongside National Citizens Advice's comparison of energy company consumer service.](#)

Adviser-only line:

An adviser-only line is a means for advice workers, from Citizens Advice or other agencies, to speak directly to an experienced support worker at the energy company. This makes it easier for us to work with people who understand and have the means to resolve issues clients are facing, without long wait times or multiple hand-overs. It makes clients' experiences quicker and easier. One of our advisers noted that:

It works very well with British Gas, they've got an adviser-only phone line and an email address that we can use and if more suppliers did the same then it'd just be more streamlined because we're not battling the customer inquiries lines, which take sometimes up to two hours, and then we've got a direct route for speaking to agents who are more highly trained than those who are on the customer service lines.

Accept Form of Authority:

Clients can sign a form of authority to give our advisers the ability to speak on their behalf, but not all energy companies accept this, with some instead requiring that the client verify the adviser's identity with each new communication. One of our advisers said that:

when we ... email or call [companies] for complaints - we try to stick to email, because then we've got a paper trail of everything that's gone on, they do

respond generally quite quick unless it's a supplier who's being incredibly difficult and won't accept our form of authority, and then that makes it even worse because ... we have to get the client in every time we want to speak to a supplier, and we have to ring them, so ... you're looking at two or three hours each time because they won't accept the forms of authority. ... Sometimes we can get complaints resolved quickly, sometimes you're looking at ... over a year.

Additional Communication issues:

OVO

When advisers call to help clients, OVO staff sometimes attempt to add them to the client's account, which would technically make the adviser liable for any debts the client has. An adviser who experienced this noted that 'This is an extremely inappropriate practice as those without the knowledge around debt could provide their personal details and then receive debt letters.'

Utility Warehouse

When complaints arise, they often ask an adviser and client to set up a shared password in order to speak to the adviser, which both the client and adviser then have to quote in all further correspondence. This delays the process of getting support significantly.

Examples of Issues

Client Case Study: Markus

Markus (not his real name) is a vulnerable client who struggles with his eyesight and with reading. When his meters were changed in early 2025, British Gas (BG) switched his meters from pre-payment to standard meters, leaving these on credit mode. However, Markus thought his meter was being upgraded, not replaced with a different type, and had no idea that he was moving from prepayment to credit billing. BG sent a letter to explain, but to quote his adviser, 'this was not an appropriate method of communication given that the supplier was aware of his reading difficulties'. As such, Markus accumulated a large debt on the credit meter.

When a complaint was made, BG said that Markus would have to have smart meters installed before they would move him back to prepayment. Markus had these fitted, but then our adviser received no reply when they emailed about getting a prepayment meter fitted. Multiple follow-up emails were sent, but when the adviser called BG they were informed that 'the case had been closed and the debt passed over to debt collectors as they had received no response from us. I provided the exact dates in which I sent emails and the agent I spoke to explained that their system has been having issues with receiving emails.'

Subsequently, despite Markus having asked that contact be made via the adviser, BG ignored the adviser's emails and contacted him directly, requiring Markus to redirect them to the adviser. When the adviser again attempted to call, BG's line repeatedly disconnected, requiring contact with a new agent each time contact was re-established. One agent would not initially allow the adviser to answer a security question based on Markus' phone number, which he could not himself read or remember due to his eyesight. Several others provided inconsistent information about the necessary conditions for installing a prepayment meter.

It took more than fifteen months for Markus' meters to be reverted. A subsequent Energy Ombudsman investigation found that he had not been provided with information in an accessible format despite his known vulnerabilities and that this

had resulted in avoidable financial detriment and prolonged distress. The Energy Ombudsman directed British Gas to provide £250 in compensation on top of £100 they had already paid, together with a written apology acknowledging the service failures. Markus accepted this outcome, and the compensation awarded enabled the outstanding arrears on his account to be cleared.

Interview with an adviser

To give a sense of the more general issues that we encounter helping clients with all of the energy companies, our researcher spoke to one of our advisers.

Q: What sort of issues do we see clients having with company communications when they make initial contact?

A: There's a lot. So, I think, the main one is whenever a client rings up and they speak to an agent they're not actually being told what they need to do, they're being told: "it seems that you're not giving meter readings," and they don't explain to the client how they need to do that or why they need to do that ... The suppliers aren't telling them why meter readings are important, how to give them, and ... how it helps keep billing accurate. [W]e have clients coming in saying, "well my bill's all estimated, the bill's all wrong, I don't owe that. I don't owe them any of that." And then we have to explain to them why a meter reading needs to be given.

... Clients are often not listened to when they say there's a fault with their meter or their smart meter. Clients also aren't informed of the options available to them if they say that they can't reach their meter. They just say, oh, we'll try to fit a smart meter in, but not everyone'll want a smart meter. [T]hen clients are ... feeling forced to have a smart meter. But ... if you're on the Priority Services Register, then ... they can come and move your meter so it's in a more reasonable place for you. ... It's not common that clients are informed of their options or kind of what they can do going forward to make the billing easier for them.

... When clients ... ring up, they'll start ... a complaint or they'll say what's been going on; Obviously when you ring up a supplier it gets ... your name, your address, your

contact info - and then when you ring up *again* it's like ... you never rang before. They don't seem to recall what it is that you previously rang up for. So [clients] have to repeat the same story over again to someone else.

... Some [companies] are quicker than others. Some will respond within a week or two. Obviously we give about two weeks anyway because we understand, you know, they're busy, there's a massive influx of calls all the time ... Sometimes we can get complaints resolved quickly, sometimes you're looking at ... over a year.

Q: What, in your mind, would an ideal relationship with energy companies look like?

A: Accepting the form of authorities ... 90% of the suppliers do accept that, it's just a few that we have issues with. Not wanting shared passwords when we give form of authorities because it slows it down; and just ... responding as soon as they're able to and actually just listening to what we're saying and not passing us to different agents. [S]ome suppliers [will] pass you through to ... four or five different agents. [New agents will] be coming back saying "oh, you need a form of authority before we can speak to you on this matter," or they'll give you information about the account, and then you'll email back and they'll come back and say "you're not authorised to speak on behalf of this client, etc. etc.," but they've already spoken to us. So they're not reading the case history, they're just picking something up and assuming it's the client. ... Once a case has been opened, stick to the same case handler, not just different agents hopping on at different points in time.

Building Trust Through Communication

Citizens Advice North Lancashire's Letters

In April, our Energy Matters Team wrote to the companies listed above, asking to discuss the issues we and our clients have experienced and for the implementation of best-practices, including adviser-only lines and accepting the Citizens Advice Form of Authority. We received initial responses from British Gas and Utilita acknowledging our letters and agreeing to talk more, but have not received any response to subsequent letters. Other companies did not reply at all.

Solutions

When issues can be resolved quickly, energy companies benefit from simpler repayments and client retention, whilst clients are left less vulnerable to debt or disconnection. We therefore recommend that all energy providers adopt the following best-practices:

- An adviser-only line to allow for easier communication;
- A policy of accepting forms of authority and allowing advisers to speak on clients' behalf without requiring other passwords or consents.

Until this happens, Citizens Advice and other advice agencies can work to inform people of where they are likely to receive better customer service. This will incentivise providers to pioneer new best-practices beyond the current market standard, in line with national Citizens Advice's commitment to push for rapid improvements in response to current price rises.