

How Citizens Advice monitors energy company performance



**citizens
advice**

About Citizens Advice

The Citizens Advice service provides free, independent, confidential and impartial advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities. It values diversity, promotes equality and challenges discrimination. On 1 April 2014, the Citizens Advice service took on the powers of Consumer Futures to become the statutory representative for energy consumers across Great Britain. The service aims:

- to provide the advice people need for the problems they face
- to improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives.

The Citizens Advice service is a network of nearly 300 independent advice centres that provide free, impartial advice from more than 2,900 locations in England and Wales, including GPs' surgeries, hospitals, community centres, county courts and magistrates courts, and mobile services both in rural areas and to serve particular dispersed groups. In 2017, Citizens Advice Service helped fix 163,000 energy problems through our local network and 61,000 through our Consumer Service. Our Extra Help Unit specialist case handling unit resolved 8,367 cases on behalf of consumers in vulnerable circumstances, and their Ask the Adviser telephone service handled 2,593 calls from other advice providers in need of specialist energy advice.

Since April 2012 we have also operated the Citizens Advice Consumer Service, formerly run as Consumer Direct by the Office for Fair Trading (OFT). This telephone helpline covers Great Britain and provides free, confidential and impartial advice on all consumer issues.

Our aims and objectives

A key goal of Citizens Advice's energy team is to help companies deliver improved customer service. Our work includes monitoring and analysing data from the hundreds of thousands of consumers who contact us, or use our online services each year. We also use the information and insights obtained through our wider policy development work, to identify where policies and processes are not working effectively, or are causing consumer harm or detriment.

Citizens Advice works with individual companies, industry trade bodies, Ofgem and BEIS to resolve issues causing consumer harm, and deliver improvements to

company policies and processes. We also have a formal duty to refer matters of concern to Ofgem.

Wherever possible, Citizens Advice will seek to identify and share best practice with individual companies and the industry as a whole.

Ongoing monitoring and analysis

Sources of data

We regularly monitor a wide range of data from our Consumer Service, our local Citizens Advice offices, the Extra Help Unit (EHU) and social media (Twitter). We look at individual supplier practices and policies, as well as industry-wide issues.

We analyse Consumer Service data for any trends as well as signs of detriment within the case notes.

Every month, we review every energy evidence form that is raised on Casebook, our case handling system, by our local Citizens Advice offices in England and Wales. The evidence forms are used by advisors to highlight emerging issues or issues causing detriment to consumers. These are linked to cases they have seen in the local offices.

The team also collect and analyse monthly, and where appropriate weekly, anonymised Twitter complaints against energy suppliers using a natural language processor to categorise the Tweets (please see Appendix A for further details of the process). We look at numbers of Tweets against key categories and, where needed, we read the Tweets for signs of detriment and customer service failings.

The EHU are responsible for analysing their own cases and identifying any trends or issues of concern. Information is shared with the energy policy team where they believe some form of further action is warranted. The EHU will also send case notes and evidence directly to Ofgem following a request from the regulator.

Where we have identified an issue or a concern

If our analysis suggests that further action is warranted, our next steps could include:

- further monitoring to see whether the issues worsen
- sending anonymised Consumer Service case notes to individual companies help them identify issues of concern
- meeting with the company to discuss the identified issues
- formally writing to the company with details of our concerns
- raising the issue at the tripartite meetings with Ofgem and the Ombudsman Services: Energy (OS:E)
- formally referring the matter to Ofgem for potential compliance or enforcement action

Please note that we may also share information with other bodies in certain circumstances. This could include the Information Commissioner's Office (where we have evidence that data privacy breaches have occurred¹) or Trading Standards.

The energy team and EHU coordinate our interactions with energy companies to avoid duplication of effort.

The majority of issues identified as causing consumer detriment are resolved through direct negotiation with individual suppliers.

When we identify extreme situations where a company's policies are causing severe detriment or where the supplier is at risk of going out of business, we may choose to immediately refer a supplier to Ofgem.

Relationship with industry

The energy team aims to have regular bilateral meetings with individual suppliers to discuss their customer service performance as well as topical issues, smart meter rollout plans, or new developments. Where relevant, the EHU will also attend these meetings.

¹ Please refer to our Memorandum of Understanding with the ICO for more details <https://ico.org.uk/media/about-the-ico/documents/1560120/mou-cab.pdf>

The energy team and EHU can provide the following information to suppliers:

- weekly or monthly reports detailing the number and type of issues their customers have contacted the Consumer Service or EHU about
- feedback on approaches previously taken by other companies to resolve customer service issues or identified consumer detriment
- advice on what is considered good or best practice across a wide range of areas
- guidance on appropriate levels of compensation and customer treatment
- where appropriate, companies will receive anonymised case notes to help them identify why their customers are contacting the Consumer Service. If a supplier is experiencing significant customer service issues, notes will be sent on a weekly or monthly basis
- where appropriate, companies will receive anonymised Twitter analysis

The energy team attend regular industry forums including the quarterly supplier liaison meetings with the EHU, Consumer Service and OSE, Energy UK, Cornwall Energy's small supplier forum and Ofgem's independent supplier forum to present updates from the team and alert industry to our ongoing areas of concern.

The energy team also have joint meetings with individual suppliers and Ofgem to discuss their debt policies and treatment of consumers in vulnerable situations.

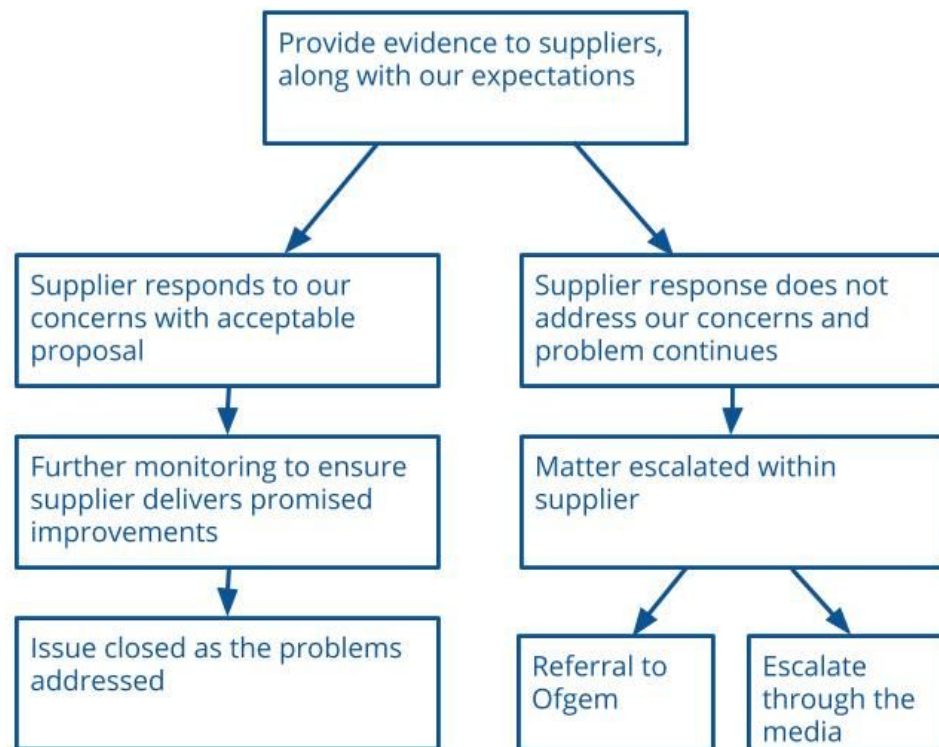
Escalating issues

After raising an issue with a company, we will give them a reasonable amount of time to address the identified issues.

Where we believe a supplier has failed to address the issue(s) in a timely fashion, we have two options. We can formally refer the matter to Ofgem if we believe there is evidence of licence breach(es). Or if there is clear evidence of consumer detriment, we may choose to escalate the matter via the media.

We will endeavour to operate a no surprises policy with industry. Any decision to escalate the issue, such as making a formal referral to Ofgem, will be communicated to companies in advance.

Figure 1: Escalation pathways



Smart meter related escalations

For issues relating to the smart meter rollout, we may escalate issues to the supplier, Ofgem and BEIS. If Citizens Advice believe the identified issues could present potential risks to the wider programme, we will follow a shorter escalation process.

Relationship with Ofgem

The Citizens Advice service, OS:E and Ofgem have a tripartite agreement, with regular meetings to discuss trends in supplier and industry performance.

Once Citizens Advice have referred a company to Ofgem or if the regulator has notified us that it has an interest in particular company, we will provide regular evidence to assist with the regulator's investigation process.

Our work has a number of benefits for Ofgem including:

- early identification of and often the resolution of problems impacting the customers of a supplier
- provision of ongoing analysis and evidence about consumer detriment, including the impact on consumers in vulnerable situations
- ability to quickly resolve more minor issues causing consumer detriment

What we publish

Citizens Advice publishes information on company performance² as part of our Energy Supplier Rating³ and our non-domestic supplier complaints league table⁴. We also publish examples of good practice in our suite of Good Practice Guides⁵, with the permission of suppliers.

Citizens Advice will not publish detailed information about individual company performance without gaining consent from the supplier beforehand.

We may publish information already in the public domain about supplier performance, where we think it is in the interest of consumers to do so. This could include data published by Ofgem, from traditional media, or social media (excluding Method52 quantitative analysis - see Appendix A).

² Under the [Utilities Act 2000](#), Part 3

³ [Citizens Advice Energy Supplier Rating](#)

⁴ [Citizens Advice non domestic supplier league table](#)

⁵ See Appendix B

Appendix A

Social Media monitoring

Citizens Advice is using a technology platform called Method52, developed by Centre for Analysis of Social Media (CASM), to analyse Twitter data. We collect all Tweets that reference specific energy suppliers, either by their Twitter handle or specified keywords.

We have trained Method52 to classify these Tweets into categories. It uses natural language processing to do this. During the set up phase, we assigned a category to each Tweet and this teaches the classifier to spot patterns in the language use associated with each category. We now have 5 trained classifiers. The first determines whether a Tweet as an 'issue' and the other 4 determine the type of issue, as follows:

First tier

(a) Tweets from consumers about a problem they have experienced, or are experiencing, relating to their energy supply. This includes information-only queries and problems reported in non-complaint language.

(b) General negative comments from consumers about the energy industry.

Second tier

- Home visit: issues relating to engineer visits to replace/exchange meters, fix boilers, etc.
- Prepayment Meters (PPM): issues relating to topping up PPMs, emergency credit, etc.
- Phone: issues relating to customer service phone lines, being on hold, being transferred between departments, etc.
- Internet: issues relating to web chat, online portals, apps, etc.

The accuracy of each classifier is measured by comparing with a 'gold standard'. This is a randomly selected set of around 300 Tweets that we have manually coded. Method52 gives us several measures of accuracy for each classifier, using the 'gold standard':

- Precision: how likely it is to classify relevant Tweets correctly

- Recall: how likely it is to miss relevant Tweets

The overall accuracy is a combination of these measures, representing the percentage likelihood of any randomly selected Tweet in the dataset being placed in the appropriate category by the classifier.

Our “issue” classifier is 79% accurate and each second tier classifier is 74-76% accurate. This means they may pick up or incorrectly classify some Tweets that are not relevant, or miss some relevant Tweets. This level of accuracy is similar to that attained in previous research by CASM. (For example, in [Islamophobia on Twitter](#), their classifiers had accuracies between 60% and 89%.)

We aim for this analysis to be used as an early indicator of issues experienced by consumers. Supplier-specific analysis will not be incorporated into the Citizens Advice star rating or included in any public reports.

Appendix B

Good Practice Guides

Citizens Advice have published a suite of guides aimed at suppliers which highlight good practice within the industry:

- [Signposting and referring vulnerable consumers](#)
- [Responding to PPM customers who self-disconnect](#)
- [Holistic support for PPM customers who self-disconnect](#)
- [Supporting customers with restricted meters](#)
- [Supporting vulnerable consumers during the smart meter roll out](#)
- [Complaints signposting](#)

We help people find a way forward

Citizens Advice provides free,
confidential and independent advice
to help people overcome their problems.

We advocate for our clients and consumers
on the issues that matter to them.

We value diversity, champion equality
and challenge discrimination.

We're here for everyone.



citizensadvice.org.uk

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