

## **Code of Practice for Accurate Bills**

### Frequently Asked Questions

#### **What is the Code?**

This Code has been developed and is managed by the Energy Retail Association to improve billing standards even further so that domestic customers can confidently receive the level of service they expect.

The Code is a set of commitments to you by Code Members to achieve improved performance in the process of billing energy, provide support on questions and have your concerns resolved.

The Members of the Code are



#### **When was it introduced?**

The Code came into full effect in 2007. The Code is regularly reviewed and Members' compliance is assessed annually by a leading, independent audit company to ensure the Code's high standards are maintained.

#### **What does it cover?**

The Code applies to domestic customer only. Some customers have commercial contracts with their Energy Supplier – these customers have specific terms and benefits in their contract to suit business or other specific needs. The Code does not apply to commercial energy supply contracts.

The Code is divided into sections covering; joining and leaving a supplier, meter readings, receiving and paying your bill, rules on how suppliers bill for previously unbilled energy, if you need extra help and care, and resolving disputes about your bill.

Read on for further specific FAQ's if you are a domestic customer and have a question on the areas highlighted

#### **I haven't been providing my energy supplier with meter readings – what will happen?**

When Suppliers do not have a meter reading they will estimate your bill. While they will attempt to make this as accurate as possible, you should always check the estimate against your meter reading. If your Supplier's meter reader has not been able to read your meter it is really important to use the facilities provided by your supplier to provide them with meter readings as this allows the supplier to bill you for the amount of energy you use.

#### **How do energy suppliers calculate estimated meter readings?**

They will estimate a customer's energy consumption by considering the amount of energy the customer has used previously, the amount of energy used by other customers who occupy similar types of homes and whether it's a time of year when a customer is likely to use more or less energy.

### **I have read my meter and the readings are different to the estimates?**

Don't worry. Usually the differences are small and may be so small that the supplier may only make the adjustment at the next bill. In any case do tell your supplier as the readings help improve future bill accuracy by being entered into the customer's consumption record.

However, a customer's energy consumption can change with an alteration in the customer's personal circumstances. The introduction of new gas or electric appliances and changes in occupancy can significantly change the amount of energy used by the customer. For example when there is a new baby in a household there may be someone in the home all day who is using more heating and other appliances than before. Alternatively customers may live away from their home for a period of time and so energy usage may reduce.

So, when an actual reading is used, the bill will be more accurate and an adjusted bill to cover any under or over estimation may be issued.

### **How do I provide the meter readings I have taken?**

The Code requires Suppliers to make sure that they offer a number of ways in which customers can provide an actual meter reading. This will vary between suppliers but examples would include:

- a dedicated telephone number that customers may call, you can find the number on your bill or statement
- a card left by the meter reader inviting the customer to fill in the meter reading and then post the card to the supplier
- through the suppliers website – details of how to do this will be on the supplier's website.

### **I'm worried that the meter reading will result in a large bill – what should I do?**

It's still better to provide the supplier with the reading, as any underestimation may increase the longer you leave it. The Code requires suppliers to work with you to provide an accurate bill and manage any payment agreements.

You might actually find that energy consumption has been over-estimated and your bills may reduce as a result of you providing an accurate customer meter reading. The Supplier may wish to arrange an appointment with you to have a meter reader call and read the meter.

### **How will suppliers refund money if I have been over charged?**

Money may be due back to a customer if they have overpaid or if the energy consumption from prior bills have been significantly overestimated. The method of refund will vary between suppliers and may depend on the customer's payment plan. For example if the customer usually pays by cheque, the refund will normally be made by cheque. If a customer normally pays by direct debit then the refund will normally be made directly into the customer's bank account.

### **Will suppliers always refund money due to customers?**

No, the supplier's refund policy will depend upon the payment plan a customer has. More information is available on request from suppliers. In some cases customers may not want to have credit balances refunded as they may prefer to carry forward any credits to pay for future consumption. Where possible, suppliers will accord with the customers' wishes but there may be circumstances where refunds are automatically generated and sent to customers.

Some payment plans carry a credit balance on the customers account over the year (for example monthly payment plans) and the customer pays the same amount each month in order to spread the energy costs over the year, building up credits for the colder months. With this type of plan, in the summer months when less energy is consumed this may lead to a credit balance on the account. This credit will be used to pay for the increased energy consumption in the winter.

**Sometimes an actual reading will not result in an estimated bill being reissued; however it will assist in improving future bill accuracy by being entered into the customer's consumption record.**

#### **What should a customer do if they cannot be at home when the meter reader calls?**

When the supplier takes a scheduled meter reading, this will normally be used to produce a bill. If the supplier cannot obtain a reading or the reading is not received in time to be included on the bill (i.e. outside of the billing window), then an estimated reading will be used.

All energy suppliers will remind customers about the importance of checking the estimated meter reading on their bill against the current reading on their meter. Suppliers will also make sure that they offer a number of ways in which customers can provide an actual meter reading. This will vary between suppliers but examples would include:

- a dedicated telephone number that customers may call
- a card left by the meter reader inviting the customer to fill in the meter reading and then post the card to the supplier
- through the suppliers website – details of how to do this will be on the supplier's website.

#### **How will suppliers make sure they include all of the information which they are obliged to on the bill?**

Each supplier will have a checklist detailing all the items they need to include on the bill. When a supplier makes a change to the bill format for any reason they will use the checklist to make sure all of the required items are included.

The Code requires each bill to provide:

- Explanation of how the bill has been calculated
- When the payment is due
- How the bill can be paid (all suppliers offer a variety of payment options)
- A clear indication of any change in price
- Ways to contact the supplier with any questions

#### **Energy suppliers sometimes change the timing of when they send bills out. Does the Code require the customer to be notified?**

The Code requires that bills are normally sent out within 15 days of the end of the normal billing period.

If the supplier needs to change when the bills are sent out, if for example there has been a change in the timing of readings made by meter readers, then the supplier will notify the customer of any changes to their billing date. This will only apply where the change is major and the impact on the bill date is 20 working days or more.

#### **What happens to direct debit customers whose monthly payments are not enough to cover their energy costs?**

Energy suppliers will monitor how much energy a customer uses against the customer's payment plan and check annually (as a minimum), that the monthly payments cover how much energy is being used. If the payments are not enough to cover the energy used then the supplier will notify the customer of the new payment amount and from what date it will apply.

Alternatively, if the monthly payments are higher than necessary to cover the energy supplied then they will be reduced to an appropriate level.

### **What help is available for customers who have difficulty paying their energy bills?**

Energy suppliers offer a wide range of services and payment options for customers who have difficulty paying their energy bills. Customers should call their energy supplier immediately if they are having difficulties paying their electricity and/or gas bills – if customers do not let their supplier know, then the supplier will be unable to offer help. Customers can also request that their bills and related correspondence are sent to a relative, friend or nominated third party.

Alternatively, customers can refer to further information at [www.homeheathelp.org.uk](http://www.homeheathelp.org.uk). This is a website for vulnerable people having difficulties paying their energy bills. If you think this would help you the Home Heat Helpline telephone number is 0800 33 66 99.

### **Does the Code allow suppliers to disconnect customers for non-payment of bills?**

Yes, however, disconnection of energy supply, for non-payment of bills, is only used as a last resort and there are detailed procedures to safeguard vulnerable customers from this.

### **Under what circumstances will suppliers agree not to charge customers for energy used?**

If the supplier is at fault, and the customer has not received a bill for energy consumed for more than one year, then any outstanding amounts that relate to energy consumed more than one year ago will be cancelled. [For further information please view the Back Billing Guidelines.](#)

### **What protection does the Code offer customers with regular payment schemes other than direct debit?**

Customers who have quarterly credit meters and pay by a regular payment scheme such as fixed cash payments will be protected in the same way as Direct Debit customers. However, the customer is always responsible for making changes to payments in line with requests from suppliers.

### **Does this Code improve the services that customers with Prepayment Meters can expect to receive?**

Suppliers will ensure that they make it clear to customers that they can expect to have their prepayment meter adjusted for any change in price or an increase in amount that the customer owes. For some types of prepayment meter, customers will need to allow the supplier access to the meter to make the appropriate adjustment. If access to the meter is prevented or obstructed by the customer then the supplier will not be considered to be at fault for not updating the prepayment meter.

### **Under what circumstances can a customer apply to the Energy Supply Ombudsman for an independent review of a complaint?**

The Energy Supply Ombudsman is there to resolve complaints which have not been resolved to the customer's satisfaction through the supplier's own complaint handling procedures.

Four criteria have been identified which need to be met before a customer complaint is considered to have reached “deadlock” and the customer will be given access to the Energy Supply Ombudsman Scheme. This is when a customer complaint has got to the position where:

- there is no new information to be gained on the complaint from either the customer or the supplier;
- the complaint escalation processes have been followed;
- the customer and the supplier still cannot agree to a resolution within the supplier’s complaint procedures; and
- having more time will not improve this position